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THE SPORT FROM ST. LOUIS



"SPORT, YE'RE MY PRIS'NER!" AND THE MARSHAL LAID HIS HAND ON THE SUSPECTED
MAN'S SHOULDER.

OR, The Three Sharks of Big Ledge.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,
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BRED," "THE RIVAL GIANTS OF NOWHAR,"
"GOLD DUST DAN, THE TRAIL PATROL,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE AMBUSH.

"YAS, sir, things aire on ther 'boom' in Big Ledge, an' ye kin jest putt up yer bottom scad thet our leetle camp aire booked fer ter be ther Queen City ov ther Nor'west! Min' ye, now—I'm quotin' solid, gospel fac'. Ye c'u'dn't lose on sech a bet! Why, Eastern capital's jest a-breakin' et's neck fer a chainece at ther big prize, an' labor's on a bull-rush from a thousan' hills!

"G'lang, Juniper!"

And Giddy Norton's whip rang out merrily. The tall, lean Jehu was in an exuberant mood.

The handsome, nattily dressed passenger beside him on the box laughed lightly.

"Sa-ay, old man, ain't you a-pilin' it on jest a leetle too thick?" he exclaimed, peering sharply into the face of his companion. "Not that I think you'd help stock the cards against a tenderfoot, you know, but this 'boom' business has gotten to be a sort of fashionable craze in the gold-camps, and wherever a fellow goes it's the same old song, with maybe a new line in the chorus."

"Nary a mite too thick, boss!" Giddy averred, with a good-natured grin. "'Facts be stubborn things,' es the feller sez, an' et's ther stubbornest kin' o' facts I'm a-layin' down ter ye. Why, jest look ther thing in ther face. Three o' ther most promisin' mines in all ther Nor'-west; two—ther Golden Horn an' ther High Hoss—in stiddy operation, an' ther third, ther Lone Hunter, fittin' up fer biz!—an' ev'ry derned one o' them showin' more ounces ter ther ton than you hev fingers an' toes ten times over! Sport, I reckon ye'll find Big Ledge 'll do to tie to!"

"Sounds like it, yes," smilingly admitted the passenger, his quizzical look vanishing. "I suppose these bonanzas have all been bought in by Eastern capitalists?"

"Not by a derned sight!" Giddy declared, as vigorously as promptly. "Dandy Jim Crocker owns the Golden Horn, an' I tell you, Jim is a dandy, too. He got ther lead from Si Haydoc, 'riginal diskiverer. The High Hoss is owned by Saul Bartol, who bought it from Billy Briggs, fa'st hand. Saul's a good feller, too, but jest a leetle uppish; hasn't been long in ther hills. As fer ther new mine, ther Lone Hunter, et's owned by Major Myst, who diskivered et."

"Jim an' Saul hev formed w'ot they calls a syndicate—ther is, they runs ther two mines in cahoots an' whack upon ther profit. I've heered that they tried ter rope ther major inter ther combine, but he fought shy."

"A syndicate, eh? Not a bad idea, I should say," and again the passenger laughed lightly. "But pray let your tongue run on, Giddy Norton—I'm getting interested in this embryo city of Big Ledge!"

"We're mighty nigh thar, Sport—ye kin see fer yerself inside o' thirty minutes," chuckled the Jehu. "But I don't mind tellin' ye w'ot I kin, as 'tain't in me ter snub a stranger."

"I reckon ther camp's got about two hundred people now. Thar's two hotels—ther Cherry House an' Riata's Ranch, an' fer a quiet feller I kalkilate ther Cherry's erbout ther thing."

"That's my ticket," the passenger declared.

"Ya-as; wal, ye'll find et all I tell ye. Kate Cherry runs ther place, an' I'm open ter bet she's es plucky an' harnsum a leetle woman es ever putt foot in ther hills. No foolishness thar, though they do say that both Major Myst an' Dandy Jim Crocker hev got their caps set dead fer ther purty leetle widder."

"Es fer Riata's Ranch, et's a hang-out fer sports, mostly. Dandy Jim an' Saul Bartol putt up thar. Both aire counted bang-up card-sharps, clean, white—"

Giddy Norton's tongue never uttered the remainder of the sentence—never another syllable. With the word "white," the off fore wheel struck a bowlder lying in the trail, and the coach veered sharply. At the same instant a rifle cracked in the bushes a hundred feet distant, and without so much as a groan poor Norton sprung erect, then toppled back upon the stoutly-railed roof of the vehicle, dead—shot through the brain!

A sound akin to a groan escaped the tightly-drawn lips of the passenger. In an instant he had seized the lines and drawn a revolver, from which he sent shot after shot at the spot marked by the telltale puff of smoke.

A sharp turn of his wrist brought the horses to a stand-still. A quick, cat-like leap carried him to the side of the trail, whence, with the speed of a professional sprinter, a weapon at full cock in each hand, he darted direct to the covert of the lurking foe.

The thicket was vacant!

The exact spot upon which the dastard had stood was easily found. The leaves of a shrub near by were sprinkled with blood, showing that at least one of the passenger's furious snapshots had found a human billet.

But the earth was dry and hard, and the trail of the retreating miscreant was not discernible.

Back to the waiting coach strode the iron-nerved sport, his face, now stern and hard, wearing an inscrutable look.

"I must look to the lady inside, for she must be in mortal dread of road-agents, poor soul!" he muttered, as he neared the vehicle.

A surprise greeted him.

The lady passenger had disappeared!

There were no signs of a struggle. Everything was in order within the coach.

"Strange!" muttered the sport, with a quick, suspicious glance at his surroundings. "There is a mystery here!"

Not a footstep could he discover to show that she had alighted from the vehicle. Around and around, in ever-widening circles, he strode, his head bent low, his blue eyes eagerly seeking the

slightest clue to the manner of her disappearance.

All in vain! The stony trail stubbornly refused to yield up its secret. Even the iron-shod feet of the coach-horses had but faintly indented its flinty surface.

Then, as a last resort, the sport called aloud, not once, but again and again, until his mellow tones set the echoes ringing.

His calls evoked no response.

"By my soul! This baffling mystery angers me!" he exclaimed, when he had at length desisted from his efforts and turned toward the coach. "The face and eyes of that beautiful woman fairly haunt me. I'll know her fate at the risk of all else!"

A handsome fellow was this sport—a man somewhere near six-and-twenty years, trimly-built and muscular, with all that ease and grace of carriage so marked in the born athlete. Bronzed and ruddy, with clear blue eyes and black hair and mustache, he was a picture of manly beauty no less than of health and strength.

There could be no question as to his calling. His garb, his weapons, his very bearing, proclaimed him a sport.

His face was full of determination and his eyes flashed darkly as he turned toward the coach. Climbing into the driver's seat, he made poor Giddy Norton's body fast to the top-railing of the vehicle, then took up the lines and resumed the interrupted journey.

"Lucky Big Ledge is within thirty minutes' ride," he muttered, recalling the dead Jehu's words as he noted the rapid lengthening of the shadows. "By George! I had no idea time was flying so! I have fooled away all of two hours on that stony-faced trail!"

Again the whip rung out, now with something sharp and spiteful in its tone, and the Sport settled himself in the seat, his face looking grim and lowering in the deepening twilight.

That he was no novice with the ribbons, however, was evident. Even Giddy Norton could scarcely have guided the heavy coach more smoothly over the rough and sinuous trail. Around the base of a hill and up a gradual slope, went the horses at a swinging trot, and then—

A mile below, at the foot of a long slope, just visible in the darkening shadows, lay the camp.

"The die is cast!" gritted the Sport, his breath coming hard and fast, the face cold and white, his blue eyes aglow with a strange fire. "There can be no retreat! It is now *do or die*!"

And down the slope at a dead run plunged the horses, compelling their driver's closest attention.

CHAPTER II.

A BOLD STAND.

THE camp of Big Ledge was fairly throbbing with excitement.

The "hearse" up from Gopher Lode was some hours overdue, and the popular belief was that it had been held up by road-agents.

The morrow was the regular monthly payday at the Golden Horn and the High Horse Mines, and it was now an open secret that to Giddy Norton had been intrusted the task of conveying the necessary funds from the bank at Gopher.

By sundown, fully one-half of the camp's denizens were gathered in and about Riata's Ranch. It was a rough, turbulent crowd, made up of the toughest characters in Big Ledge.

Before the ranch, and slightly apart from their fellows, stood Dandy Jim Crocker, of the Golden Horn and Saul Bartol, of the High Horse.

The two men were engaged in a low-toned, earnest conversation.

Crocker was a man who would have attracted attention anywhere. He towered nearly two inches above the tallest of his fellows, and his form was one of matchless symmetry. As if to render himself yet more conspicuous, he wore clothing of snowy whiteness, a high white hat covering his head, while his shapely feet were incased in glossy patent leathers. At his middle, a broad girdle of maroon-colored silk supported a ten-inch bowie, and a brace of heavy, splendidly-mounted revolvers.

Yet on the sunny side of forty, genial, free-hearted and pleasant-featured, with a massive brown beard and a bright gray eye, Dandy Jim was by long odds the most popular man in the camp.

His companion, Saul Bartol, was a thin, dark, nervous-looking man, in age anywhere from thirty to thirty-five. Dusky almost as an Indian, with piercing hazel eyes, jet-black hair and mustache, he had a crafty, dangerous look. He was plainly dressed and well armed, and seemed to shun observation.

These two men ruled Big Ledge—had ruled it almost from the first.

"I suspect," Crocker was saying at the moment we introduce him to the reader, "I suspect, Bartol, that we had better get a posse together and go down the trail. The non-arrival of Giddy Norton and the coach begins, to my mind, to look pretty darned suspicious."

"Exactly so!" tersely affirmed Bartol, restlessly shifting from one foot to the other. "Giddy has a considerable amount of boodle aboard this trip—a fact that has doubtless gotten abroad despite all our precautions to keep it quiet."

"Yes, yes; the odds are about a thousand to one that he has run afoul of a pack of prowling road-agents and gotten the worst of it. But it is growing dark now, so that we couldn't possibly find their trail before morning; we can, however, fully satisfy ourselves as to the cause of the delay."

"Call the men together, pick out a half-score trusty fellows, and let us be off."

Dandy Jim Crocker needed no urging. Hastily mounting an inverted box in front of the ranch, he raised his hand with the words:

"Gentlemen, attention!"

His deep voice rung out like a trumpet, and an instant hush came over the turbulent gathering.

A moment thus, then, ere the big mine-owner could utter the words trembling upon his tongue's end, down the long slope, borne by the mountain breezes, came the rumble of wheels, the swift, ringing stroke of iron-shod feet.

"Ther hu'ss!—by Christopher!" burst from the lips of a bearded rough within arm's reach of Crocker, and then up from the crowd went a throat-splitting cheer.

Descending from the box, the man in white hurriedly sought out Bartol.

"No need for the Vigilantes just yet, Saul," he muttered, his voice heavy with anxiety, his gray eyes peering sharply around. "What in the deuce *can* have broke loose, do you suppose?"

"Wait," was Bartol's uneasy response. "We must let Giddy speak for himself. The hearse will be in in a moment. It is coming like mad."

Saul Bartol's assertion was true. The coach-horses were descending the gentle slope at a killing pace. Within three minutes from the time Dandy Jim Crocker had mounted the box to address the crowd, the coach came to a full stop directly in front of Riata's Ranch.

Even in the gloom it was plainly to be seen that the man in the driver's seat was not Giddy Norton.

"Bear a hand, gentlemen," sung out a clear voice from the coach-top. "Here—catch the ribbons, some of you, and let us have a light of some kind. Giddy Norton's in a deuced bad fix, and I reckon I'll have to ask for help to get him down decently."

"What was it—road-agents?" queried Dandy Jim, eagerly elbowing his way to the front rank of the crowd, his voice rising distinctly above the confused murmur following the Sport's announcement. "We've been fearful of such an attack, and my pard and I were on the point of raising a posse to hunt up the coach when we heard it coming in."

"Nary road-agents," was the terse reply. "Giddy Norton was shot from ambush—murdered by a cowardly assassin! That is all I have to say, just now. Let us get the poor fellow down. After that, any explanation you may want that I can make, gentlemen, is yours for the asking."

And the Sport was as good as his word, turning a deaf ear to the constant flow of questions from the eager, curious crowd.

A moment sufficed to make all necessary arrangements. At the request of Riata Jce, the corpse was taken into the bar-room of the ranch and placed at full length on two tables set end to end.

"He hung up with me at this eend of his run," Riata explained, "an' now 'at he's passed, I reckon I ain't goin' ter be too uppish ter give him shelter till he's ready ter plant. 'Sides, et'll be handy-like, seein' as ther marshal hangs out hyar, too."

The removal accomplished, it was discovered that the marshal was missing. Riata announced that he was in his room up-stairs, sleeping off the effects of a protracted spree, and a man was dispatched to arouse him.

Pending the official's appearance, Dandy Jim invited the crowd to join him at the bar—an invitation that met with an acceptance as prompt as general.

The Sport, however, declined to take anything stronger than water, much to the surprise of the crowd.

"Ye're wastin' a chaine ter spile some mighty good liquor," the burly Riata declared. "I reckon I keep ther best p'izen in ther Territory."

"I've no reason to dispute that," was the careless response; "but I have found that liquor isn't good for my head, and so I never drink it."

"Then your head ain't screwed on jest right!" vowed Riata, and forthwith drowned his disgust in a brimming bumper.

Saul Bartol then treated, and, a moment later, the landlord followed suit. This last round had just been finished when the marshal made his appearance, looking considerably the worse for the interruption of his drunken slumber.

Dan Burgess was his name. He was a solidly-built fellow, full six foot in height, bull-necked and heavy-handed. A keen judge of human nature would at first glance have pronounced him a domineering, brutal scoundrel.

"What's up—what's up?" he surlily demanded, stepping just inside the door and running his bloodshot eyes over the throng. "Si Haydoc tells me su'thin' erbout Giddy Norton's bein' killed. Fact?"

"Gospel," returned Dandy Jim, coming forward. "Giddy was shot, down the trail a ways, and the coach has just been brought in by a passenger."

"Whar's ther passenger?"

"I'm the man," and the strange Sport stepped forward, meeting the official's suspicious gaze with a grim little smile.

"Good enough; we'll go clean ter ther bottom o' this affair, right away," Burgess declared, with the swaggering, self-confident air peculiar to him on such occasions.

"Curly Slayback, you 'tend the door. Let in all who come, but mind no one goes out 'thout my say-so."

"Now, then, Sport, onbosome yerself. Don't dodge or wriggle over a pint, but jest let ther hull thing out."

Again that grim smile parted the thin red lips of the Sport, and an ominous glitter appeared in his steel-blue eyes. Had the marshal's head been a trifle less beclouded with liquor, the real significance of these seeming trifles would have been apparent to him. The Sport realized that his situation might at any moment become one of supreme peril. He knew, intuitively, that from the moment he put foot in the Ranch a subtle hand had been shaping affairs against him, and he was quick to suspect Burgess an enemy.

In a plain, straightforward way he told all that he really knew of the trail tragedy.

When the story was done, it became evident that the marshal was sorely puzzled.

He scratched his head dubiously, then with a look of owlish wisdom, started in on a rigid cross-examination.

As the third question passed his lips, a man hurriedly entered the bar-room with the startling announcement that the treasure packages were missing—that the coach had been robbed!

Instantly, all was confusion. It required the combined efforts of Dandy Jim, Bartol and the marshal to restore even a semblance of order.

To the Sport the declaration was no great surprise. The thought instantly suggested itself that the robbery had been committed after the stage's arrival at Big Ledge. Otherwise, the young lady passenger must have had a hand in the crooked deal, and he felt that that was an idea too repulsive to be retained a moment.

But he was too shrewd an observer not to see that this last phase of the mysterious affair had set the tide strongly against him.

Not one in ten of the camp's denizens present but had at once jumped to the conclusion that the handsome Sport, if not an immediate party to the robbery, at least knew considerably more than he had disclosed, and the looks leveled at him were dark and full of suspicion.

Yet, his face was as calm and unruffled as ever. The smile hovering over his lips was even less grim, now that he knew whence the impending blow was to come. He stood with his back to the wall, at the front end of the long bar, a cigar between his teeth, the fingers of his right hand toying with the seal dangling from his watch-chain. So far as appearances went, he was utterly ignorant of the danger threatening him.

The marshal, Dandy Jim and Saul Bartol had drawn aside and entered into an earnest consultation.

Five—ten—fifteen minutes passed, and the continued suspense was rapidly becoming unendurable to the half-drunken crowd, when Burgess suddenly turned and strode straight up to the suspected man.

"Sport, ye're my prisoner!" and the marshal laid his hand on the suspected man's shoulder.

"Ye're safer under lock an' key, till we git at the straight ov this thing!"

The marshal spoke in a fierce, blustering tone, as if determined at the start to overcome any latent disposition to resist his authority.

He little knew his man.

"I'm sorry, Johnny—awfully sorry," the Sport exclaimed, in the smoothest of strains, as he gracefully knocked the ashes from the tip of his cigar, "but I can't go with you this evening—I really can't! And that settles it!"

The change in his voice as he uttered the last words was absolutely startling. In some way, too, a cocked revolver had found its way into his outstretched hand, and its frowning muzzle stared the officer straight between the eyes.

Burgess had long been accounted a man of iron nerve, but he shrunk perceptibly and grew white to the lips.

"Rest easy over there, gentlemen!" deliberately enunciated the Sport, with a slight nod to the throng back of the marshal. "Don't attempt to pink me, please—'twill be the death of our dearly beloved here, if you do! For even should you succeed in getting a bullet through my thick head, the merest spasmodic contraction of the muscles in my fingers would be all-sufficient to scatter his pitiful brains to the four winds."

"So keep cool, gentlemen, and your friend

will wear longer. And while you are doing it we can stand still, quite still, just as we are, and reason together."

A score revolvers were leveled at the reckless fellow, yet not a man dared press trigger, all knowing full well that underneath the half-mocking strains lay bitter truth—that even a fatal shot would almost certainly be followed by the marshal's death.

"There are never less than two sides to a case, gentlemen, and I assure you that I do not intend to chance dying with my side unheard," the Sport continued, his eyes gaining in brilliancy, the smile on his red lips in mockery. "Life—"

"My dear sir, you have gotten the wrong idea into your head," Dandy Jim interrupted, his voice ringing out sharply. "No one is going to murder you. This is a civilized camp, and you will be given every chance to clear your skirts."

The Sport laughed ironically.

"I hold to a different opinion, my Titanic friend, he exclaimed, briskly. "The bullet that laid Giddy Norton lifeless was intended for me!"

"Should I surrender, before morning I would be dead—the victim of a howling mob!"

"I thank you, but such 'fair play' is not the kind I seek. I prefer the chance to die game!"

Sternly his voice rung through the room, causing more than one of the eager crowd to shrink back as under the stroke of a whip-lash.

Then:

"Brave words, bravely spoken, Dell!"

"By heavens! I am with you to the death!"

The speaker was a new-comer, standing just inside the door—a handsome, muscular, black-eyed man, with his left hand tightly bandaged, his right gripping a revolver.

With that bold declaration, he advanced to the side of the Sport, saying:

"My friends, if you have taken this man for a thief or an assassin, you have struck decidedly the wrong scent."

"He is Dell Daunt, known in the gold-camps of Idaho as the High Card from Top Notch, and a whiter man doesn't breathe!"

"Crowd him, and you'll crowd me!"

The man who thus boldly and openly took sides with the imperiled sport was Major Myst, owner of the new mine, the Lone Hunter.

CHAPTER III.

THE DEAD UNMASKED.

JUST a moment of deathlike silence followed the mine-owner's sharply-uttered words, then up from the gathering of roughs rose a hoarse, ominous murmur.

The potent liquor so liberally supplied them had done its work.

They were ripe for deviltry.

Had there been one among them bold and reckless enough to take the lead, the High Card would have been torn limb from limb the moment he bid defiance to the marshal.

They regarded the advent of Major Myst with anything but favor. At best, the mine-owner had never been popular with the rougher class of the camp's denizens, and now that he had openly avowed himself the Sport's champion, their indignation knew no bounds.

From that moment, they were as bitter against him as against the sport himself.

"Down with 'em, pard!" grated a fierce-looking rough a pace in the rear of Dandy Jim. "Rope 'em both! They're in cahoots, dang 'em!"

"Kill them!"

"Kill them!"

"Yas, yas—wipe 'em out! They ought ter die!"

These cries and many others went up, and then the maddened crowd surged forward, brandishing weapons of every description.

A terrible crisis was at hand.

Like lightning, Dandy Jim whirled around. His clubbed revolver rose and fell, and the leader of the rush went down, senseless as a log.

"Back! back!" the Titanic sport shouted, his voice full and terrible, his revolvers staring the foremost of the excited men in the face. "Back! By heavens! I'm running this thing! Let a man put foot forward till I give the word—if he dares!"

"Shoulder to shoulder, pardner!" uttered a quiet voice at his elbow—the voice of Saul Bartol. "Go back, boys! Let Jim and myself settle this matter. If we find we can't—"

A peculiar twist of his neck gave strength to the hiatus. Not a man there but read his meaning aright!

"Jest es ye say, boss; but et's hard!" grumbled Si Haydoc, who stood in the front rank.

"Hard, yes; but give the man a chance to come to terms, Si. If he's guilty, you may gamble on it that he won't escape!"

"My friend is not guilty, gentlemen," broke in Major Myst, with a mirthless little laugh. "While you are gambling, you may put your money on that, too!"

Dandy Jim turned upon the owner of the Lone Hunter with a savage imprecation.

"Don't you think you are running a pretty big risk, major, in championing the cause of that—that—"

"Dell Daunt, if you please, colonel!" softly interrupted Myst, a lurid glint showing in his dark eyes. "He is a gentleman, too, if you can appreciate the fact!"

"Odds the name—it's the man we want," growled Crocker, flushing to the temples. "He is under direct suspicion of having had a hand in the murder of Giddy Norton and the robbery of the stage, and the citizens of Big Ledge demand that he be placed in safe-keeping until the matter can be looked into."

The major smiled sardonically.

"I understand just how the case stands," he declared, in a resolute tone. "We all know that suspicion is not evidence. I do not believe my friend here is guilty. I have heard his theory as to the shot that killed Norton, and I believe it is the correct one—that the bullet was intended for the passenger, not the driver. If this be so, Daunt has an enemy in these hills, and that enemy is doubtless right here in Big Ledge, ready and willing to work him harm. Under the circumstances it would be the height of folly for him to yield an inch."

"Bosh!" ejaculated Bartol. "Why, you must admit yourself, major, that your friend's part in the affair has a suspicious look. You must understand, too, right here, that we intend to take and hold him—if not peaceably, then by force of arms."

Then, for the first time since the entrance of Major Myst, the suspected Sport spoke.

"It is useless to argue the matter, gentlemen," he exclaimed, his handsome face as placid as a May morn. "I must firmly decline to yield myself up as a prisoner. That means that you must take me by force of arms—not a hard task, maybe, but one in which I assure you some one will be hurt."

"And, now, major, let me beg of you to withdraw. Leave me to paddle my own canoe."

"Never!" calmly declared Myst.

Dandy Jim raised his hand impatiently, and strode across to the opposite wall, closely followed by Bartol.

"For the last time, do you surrender?" cried the big mine-owner, his gray eyes beaming wickedly.

"You have my answer," the High Card replied.

"And mine," added the major.

Dandy Jim looked at the crowd of miners, and caught Haydoc's eye.

"Go!" he hissed, bringing his broad palms together.

"Stay!" and Major Myst's long white finger pointed from the open door to open windows.

The crowd moved not, while a bitter imprecation escaped Dandy Jim; he and his friends were covered by no less than a score leveled repeating rifles!

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, savagely, his flaming gray eyes darting hot, suspicious glances at the High Card and his friend. "Have you turned robber chief, major? Do you intend to raid the camp?"

"I simply intend that my friend shall have fair play, whatever the cost," was the stern reply. "The sooner you get that fact through your head and come to terms the better."

"Terms—the devil! What terms do you want?" gritted the Titanic sport, his face purple with chagrin.

"I merely want it understood that you and your crew keep hands off my friend here until the death of Giddy Norton and the robbery of the stage can be looked into. Know all men, too, that myself and my property are to be held responsible for the appearance of Dell Daunt."

"That seems reasonable enough," exclaimed Bartol, with a swift side-glance at the face of his partner. "Why, major, couldn't you have expressed yourself as plainly at first?"

"It is sometimes necessary to knock a man down to make him understand," was the suggestive retort.

"I don't see why we should object to the terms you name," Dandy Jim observed, reluctantly. "Anything to save bloodshed."

"Then call your men off, and we'll go right ahead with the investigation. It will relieve Burgess here, who reminds me of nothing more than a ham on a meat-hook."

The marshal scowled darkly, but remained motionless. The muzzle of the Sport's revolver was within a foot of his face.

Surlily, Dandy Jim gave the word; the crowd fell back and put up their weapons.

This done, into the bar-room filed the men of Major Myst, five-and-twenty in number, brawny miners from the Lone Hunter mine, all armed with repeating rifles and revolvers.

"Make yourselves easy, boys!" said the major, with a wave of his bandaged hand. "I hardly think there will be a call for your services, but if there is—well!"

The ejaculation was significant enough. There was not a man in the room who failed to catch the mine-owner's meaning.

"You had better conduct the examination, Burgess," he continued. "I would suggest that we take a look at the corpse, first of all."

Completely sobered, the marshal led the way to the table supporting the body of poor Giddy Norton and the examination was begun.

The bullet had entered the head of the un-

fortunate Jehu an inch above the right eye and passed out slightly above and to the rear of the left ear. The absence of powder-stains showed that the shot had not been fired at very short range.

"Looks es ef ther bullet might 'a' come from a repeater," the marshal observed. "Tany rate, pore Giddy never knowed w'ot hurted 'im."

Beyond this, the examination of the wound developed nothing. The next step was to go through the dead man's clothing.

Here, an important discovery was made.

In a skillfully-hidden pocket in Norton's shirt was found a folded sheet of paper, which the marshal opened and handed to Dandy Jim.

Major Myst was eying the Titan sharply, and fancied he detected a look of relief on the big mine-owner's face.

"This is a most important document, gentlemen," Dandy Jim declared, with due impressiveness, after a moment. "It certifies that the bearer, Bridge Gerry, of Denver, is a member of Cook's Detectives!"

"Or in other words, that our Giddy Norton was a durned fraud!" viciously added Riata, breaking the silence following the mine-owner's words. "A wolf in sheep's clothing, lyin' in wait ter nab one o' ther lambs o' Big Ledge!"

"Exactly—barring your rather harsh way of putting it, the Titan assented.

"And now, gentlemen, that Norton is unmasked, and we have a hint at the nature of his real business here, a trifle of the mystery enshrouding his taking off clears away.

"What more likely than that he has fallen by the hand of the man he was seeking?"

"Yes, but *who* was that man?" put in Saul Bartol. "That's the sticking-point."

"And will probably remain so," was the Titan's grave rejoinder. "As the matter stands, major, this discovery goes a long way toward upsetting your friend's theory of the shot."

"That remains to be seen," returned Major Myst. "In any event, remember that I am responsible for Mr. Daunt's appearance."

"That is understood, certainly."

Dandy Jim and Bartol then drew aside and entered into an earnest conversation. Without appearing to do so, the High Card kept an eye on them, and discovered that he was the object of frequent but furtive glances from both.

The examination of the corpse proceeded with no new developments. When it had ended, Burgess spread a handkerchief over the ghastly face, and the crowd began to break up.

At this juncture the door of the bar-room was violently flung open, and a tall, ungainly man, with blood-stained face and clothes hanging in tatters, staggered inside carrying a rifle at a trail.

"Who—Wal, dang my eyes! ef 'tain't Sandy Parsons!" uttered Riata, in deep-toned surprise, as he sidled around to his accustomed position behind the bar. "W'ot on airth's ther matter, Sandy, ole fel? Look like ye'd bin in et with a grizzly!"

"Wuss luck!" groaned the wretch, reeling up to the bar. "Fer ther love ov heaven! pour me some whisky, quick! I'm clean dyin'!"

The burly Riata needed no urging. With deft hands he set out and filled a glass, then gave his customer a critical looking over.

Sandy Parsons was certainly in bad shape. His face and hands, earth-stained and bloody, were bruised and torn, and he was so faint that it was only with the greatest difficulty that he kept his feet.

That he had a tragic story to tell, none doubted, and the inmates of the place quickly crowded up, eager to hear the full particulars of the experience that had left him in such an awful plight.

"W'ot was et, Sandy?—w'ot was et?" Riata demanded, when the disfigured miner had emptied his second glass without speaking. "Not another snifter—not another drop, min' ye, till ye onbosome yerself!"

"That's boss sense," the marshal declared, pushing forward to a position beside Parsons. "Come, Sandy—you've got a story ter tell, an' we're all waitin' ter hear et."

"Don't crowd—don't tech me!" grated the miner, huskily. "I'm sick, an' es sore es a gum-b'ile! Thar's time a-plenty, an' *you* ain't sufferin'!"

"Barkeep, jest one more, or not another word this night!"

Riata caught an approving nod from Dandy Jim, and reluctantly set out the bottle.

"Now, I'll tell ye, pards," Sandy Parsons continued, his bloodshot brown eyes furtively surveying the crowd, as his fingers closed greedily around the whisky glass; "Giddy Norton was killed to-day, an' I seen et all!"

A hoarse murmur went up from the throng. "Yas, sir, I seen et all," pursued Parsons, with the utmost deliberation; "an' I tell you, et was a mighty nasty trick. Giddy wasn't given even ther ghost ov a show. His murderer lay hid in ther bush and guv et ter ther pore devil from un'er cover."

Without heeding the cries for him to continue, or the demands for the name of the assassin, the miner slowly sipped his liquor, then proceeded, saying:

"Ye see, et was like this: This maruin' I took my gun an' started off through ther hills arter a bit o' fresh meat; but I was in oncom-mon hard luck, fer not a shot at anything wuth ther powder c'u'd I get, an' so along to'ards three o'clock I started back ter camp."

"I'd walked an hour, mebbe, when I came in sight o' ther trail, an' saw ther huss' comin' wi' Giddy an' a passenger on ther box."

"I war on ther hill four or five hundred yards east o' ther trail, an' had jest made up my min' ter hail Giddy fer a lift inter camp, when a rifle cracked in ther bushes below me, an' ther pore cuss fell back—done for!"

"Quicker'n a wink ther passenger war down, bangin' away inter ther bush at every jump. He drove ther villain out o' kiver, an' I was jest bringin' my gun up fer a shot when the stun I war standin' on slipped an' threw me, an' let me down ther side o' ther hill quicker'n a flash."

"An' thet was ther last I knew till I come to, less'n an hour ago, clean tuckered out."

"But you did not recognize the murderer?" demanded Dandy Jim, with no little eagerness.

"I putt ther two eyes o' mine onter him, an' knowed him," was the deliberate reply. "He was Hermit Hart!"

"Hermit Hart?" Saul Bartol ejaculated, with a sort of fierce incredulity.

"Hermit Hart!" echoed the crowd, wonderingly.

"Yes, pards, ther hermit," asseverated Parsons, bringing his clinched hand down upon the bar.

"By heavens! then he shall hang!" Dandy Jim declared, wrathfully. "This explains his queer actions—his hiding away in the hill. He is a fugitive from justice. Recognizing Giddy as a detective, he has killed him to avoid arrest!"

"You've called et straight es a string, colonel," said the marshal. "I'll get a few o' ther boys tergether an' go after him."

"You can save yourself the trouble, Mr. Burgess," spoke up a small, dark-visaged man near the end of the bar, Gabriel Deubar by name, by profession a lawyer. "The hermit will be at my office at noon to-morrow."

"But this affair may keep him away."

"Little risk of that. He has five thousand dollars at stake."

"I would think that would fetch him in," Bartol observed.

"I'll risk it, anyway," declared the marshal.

"It's little odds whether he's taken in to-night, or to-morrow," said Dandy Jim. "The main thing is that he doesn't escape."

"Well, when he is brought in, just remember that there are always two sides to a case, Colonel Crocker," suggested Myst, as with the High Card he turned to leave the room.

"Always!" was the sneering retort. "Let me beg of you to remember, too, that your sportive friend isn't out of the woods yet. That robbery charge you know!"

"We'll attend to that charge in due time, my Titanic friend, and when it is done with I have a word to say to *you*," returned the High Card, a gleam of fire showing in his deep blue eyes.

The two men then quitted the ranch.

CHAPTER IV.

TREACHERY.

STRAIGHT to his room at the Cherry House went Major Myst with his friend, the High Card.

"It would hardly be wise in us to show ourselves any more than is necessary to-night," the major remarked, as he strode along beside the Sport. "There are some mighty bad citizens among the men of Big Ledge—fellows who would take long chances to lay out a man if well paid, or even to square a fancied grudge."

"No doubt of it!" returned Daunt, with a grim little chuckle. "And it is equally true, major, that just now we are not the most popular men in the camp. I fancy there are a half-score or so of these vipers, ranging from Dandy Jim Crocker down to the lowest rough temporarily deprived of his month's pay by the robbery, who would fang us in the back with a keen relish."

"Yes, yes; it behooves us to carry ourselves guardedly until we have strengthened every sinew for the war. Then let strike who will!"

"My view, precisely. I have done all I could do on such short notice, but much remains undone. As this is hardly the place to go into details; we'll lay that part of the subject by untill safe in my room."

As the major concluded, he led the way into the hotel, making use of a part of the hall entrance from which a steep flight of stairs led up to the second story, where he occupied a corner chamber, front.

The upper hallway was but dimly lighted, long and narrow, and uncarpeted.

"The Cherry House is not much in the way of elegance, but it is thoroughly honest," the mine-owner observed, as he unlocked and flung

open the door of his room. "I bid you welcome, Dell. Make yourself at home."

"Thank you, major," the High Card returned, his blue eyes sweeping restlessly around the room.

The chamber was plainly but comfortably furnished. The rough board walls were bare, but the two windows were curtained and a carpet covered the floor. Two cots, a couple of chairs, a small square table and a lamp, comprised the furniture.

The front window was closed and the curtain lowered, but the lower sash of the one in the side wall was hoisted and the curtain raised, the better to admit what little air was stirring.

Leaving the door wide open, Major Myst moved the table near the center of the room, in a position to command a clear view of the hallway, then placed a chair for the High Card.

"I suspect that it will be just as well to guard against any one's listening at the door," he remarked, seating himself. "I noticed that we were followed when we quitted the Ranch, and I have resolved that the Paul Prys shall work for all the points they obtain."

"It would be as well, too, Dell, for you to keep an eye on that open window. There is a shed roof five feet beneath it which may tempt some of the prowling gentry. I have taken due precautions, but we can afford to take no chances."

"Then I'll look out for that point," declared Daunt, as he selected a cigar from the box on the table. "I have an idea that we are to hear from our friends, the enemy to-night, and it will never do to permit them to steal a march on us."

"If they attempt it, they will find that that caper is hard to work," the major returned.

"When Pete Jenkins arrived with your message last night, I immediately set to work and called thirty good and reliable men from the Lone Hunter force, and five of that number are now in and around this building, doing guard duty; and should the miscreants succeed in penetrating this guard line, they would yet find us up and ready for business."

"Not a bright outlook for a spy, truly! But, major, when did Long Pete leave on his errand to Gray Wolf?"

"About twelve, last night. He kept under cover while here, and there's not a soul who detected his presence in camp."

"That is well. I feared for a moment that Dandy Jim and Bartol suspected something to-night, if they had not indeed hired the assassin to lie in wait for the stage."

"You still hold, then, that the shot was intended for you?" queried the mine-owner, his face betraying deep interest.

"Oh, yes! It was by the merest accident, too, that the driver was slain in my stead. At the very instant the shot was fired, one fore-wheel struck a bowlder, causing the coach to lurch violently to one side, and Giddy Norton received the bullet intended for me."

"And the story told by Sandy Parsons?"

"A deliberately concocted lie! *That man was himself the assassin!*"

"By heavens! I can hardly believe it!"

"Well, I am pretty positive I am right. Aside from the blood-money the fellow was doubtless to receive, he swore a couple of years ago to have my life because I chanced to save Indian Pete from his drunken fury. So, if he was put up to my identity, he would have had a double motive."

"But who is this Hermit Hart whom Parsons accused?"

"Oh, a bill vagrant—a mysterious old fellow, living—the Lord knows just where," replied the mine-owner, lightly. "He is rumored to have discovered and to be working a rich lode, though I think that report the veriest nonsense. It is also said that he has a daughter of marvelous loveliness."

"Not at all strange, then, that he keeps secret his place of habitation," the High Card remarked. "The white no less than the red renegades, prowling through these hills, would lose precious little time in getting possession of her did they but know where to strike."

"On the whole, major, I'm sorry the stage affair has taken the present turn. It's long odds the hermit will be lynched when he appears to-morrow."

"He will, undoubtedly."

"Can't we prevent it?"

"Why should we?"

The High Card's face darkened at the carelessly uttered query, and into his blue eyes flashed a half-angry, half-suspicious gleam as he peered keenly at the partly averted face of his friend.

"There are numerous good reasons why we should interfere, the chief of which is that the man is innocent," he replied, slowly. "But let the matter pass."

"It would be folly to add to the hazard of our situation," the mine-owner declared. "You must remember that the odds are four to one against us now, and we must make, not lose friends."

"The Lone Hunter men, with the single exception of Tom Sawyer, the superintendent, have not the slightest inkling of the [real issue,

and it would be poor policy to crowd a fight upon them in defense of a man they have long regarded with suspicion."

"Let it pass—let it pass," entreated the High Card, hiding a yawn behind one of his trim white hands. "I think I shall turn in, major. I am about tuckered out."

"By the way, I notice you have your hand bandaged."

Major Myst started, and a look of annoyance crossed his handsome face.

"Yes, and that recalls a deucedly disagreeable subject, one that I had for the moment forgotten," he exclaimed, holding up the injured member.

"Then I am sorry I mentioned it."

"It is better that you did speak of it, for the matter may be one of prime importance, in the light of the stand taken by Dandy Jim and Saul Bartol to-night. In fact, I may say that the circumstances under which this wound was received go a long way to show that the shot which killed Norton was really intended for you."

"To explain. For nearly a month past there has been hanging around the camp a fat, greasy-looking old rascal, whom the boys have dubbed Whisky Bill from the quantity of free liquor he absorbs. Just how he manages to live has been a problem too deep for the average man to solve. He struck the camp broke, and hasn't been guilty of an hour's work since his arrival, so far as is known."

"Well, shortly before noon to-day, I had Sawyer come up to the mine office to complete arrangements for having a number of men on hand when the coach came in, so that in the event of your being recognized and attacked the enemy would not have things all his own way."

"The office doors and windows were open, commanding every possible approach, and as the coast seemed clear we talked freely in ordinary tones, up to the point of arranging our plans for this evening. We had spoken of your coming in on the stage, and I was just at the point of telling Sawyer to get the men out two hours earlier than usual, when a loud sneeze just beneath the rear window interrupted me."

"Sawyer sprung forward, drawing his revolver, one of those new double-action tools; but his elbow struck the corner of the desk, and one chamber of the weapon was discharged, the ball plowing an ugly furrow across the back of my hand."

"Then up from the ground beneath the window rose this fleshy bum—this Whisky Bill—wanting to know, in an aggrieved tone, what on earth we meant by disturbing a gentleman's slumbers in so unceremonious a manner."

"The fellow had been listening to our talk, I am certain, though at the time he succeeded in humbugging both of us into the belief that he had simply been lying there enjoying a nap in the shade."

"So we let him slip. Note the result: In less than an hour, as I have since learned, he was seen in close conversation with Colonel Jim Crocker!"

"Undoubtedly a spy," commented the High Card. "His presence under the office window explains the ambush."

"It looks more and more like a tough fight, major; but I am determined to oust these scoundrels, avenge my pard, and restore the Golden Horn and the High Horse to their rightful owners."

"To-morrow I will go down to the Lone Hunter, and you can formally turn the property over to me."

"The sooner the better," declared Myst, knitting his dark brows. "But do you know, Dell, that the disappearance of that lady passenger during your absence from the coach to-day puzzles me? Could it be possible that she absconded with the treasure?"

"Possible, but hardly probable. It is my belief that the treasure is here in Big Ledge, that the lady became frightened during my absence, sprung from the coach and fled into the hills. As soon as I obtain possession of the Lone Hunter to-morrow, I shall organize a posse and go in search of her, for I am determined to solve the mystery of her disappearance."

"And yet she may have been that reckless creature known as Captain Kate, the Lady Bandit, of whom I wrote you."

"Admitted."

There the conversation closed. The High Card rose and made his preparations to retire. Before lying down, however, he asked for a glass of water, and as there was none in the room the major descended to the first floor to get it.

No sooner had the Sport been left alone than he approached the lamp and carefully opened a bit of paper which he had held crumpled in his hand during the interview.

Penciled upon it was the following message:

"DELL DAUNT:—

"You are trusting one who is false, and who will betray you. Be cautious and wary, for you are in deadly danger. Heed this, or the Lone Hunter Mine will cost you your life. B. D."

The High Card's expression did not change, save that the gleam in his blue eyes grew a trifle more pronounced. Lighting the message at the lamp, he burned it to ashes.

A moment later Major Myst returned with the water, then the Sport flung himself wearily upon one of the cots, with his trusty weapons at hand.

Scarcely had his head touched the pillow when his eyes closed and he sunk back inert and helpless, as one under the influence of a powerful soporific.

For a moment Major Myst regarded him with a look of strange intentness, then stealthily rose and approached the cot.

CHAPTER V.

THE HIGH CARD'S COURIER.

"THAR is ther camp—ther scene o' action."

Long Pete Jenkins uttered the words. He stood in a sheltered niche in the side of the hill overlooking Big Ledge from the east, his eyes busy with the features of the gold-camp.

The old ranger would have attracted attention anywhere. He was all of six-feet-six in his moccasins, lean and sinewy, with a well-knit frame. A fringe of yellowish-gray hair encircled the base of his skull and fell in thin whisks about his shoulders, but his dusky face was beardless. He was clothed in buckskin, and heavily armed.

It was the night before that on which occurred the scenes narrated in the preceding chapters.

The shadows were lengthening in the valley below him, but the keen eyes of the ranger readily made out the lay of the camp.

"Not hafe a bad place, from ther looks o' things," he muttered. "Ef I c'd on'y—Yas, t'at's it, thet tree by ther side o' ther trail. Now fer Jezebel, then hol fer ther rendezvous."

Retreating from the leafy covert, the tall ranger made his way along the hillside, keeping under cover as much as possible. At the end of ten minutes he was greeted by a low whinny, and, a moment later, halted beside a speedy-looking sorrel mare tethered in a clump of pines.

Very leisurely, it seemed, Jenkins tightened his saddle-girth, then untied the animal, mounted and rode away. His course was a circuitous one, and it was fully an hour before he arrived at the marked tree beside the Gopher Lode trail.

The spot was a lonely one, and the ranger peered into the shadows sharply as he drew rein just outside the pale of the wide-spreading branches.

"It's a condemned purty place fer a night ambush," he could not help thinking. "In course, it's all foolishness ter s'pect anything o' thet kind, es thar's on'y one man in twenty mile 'round es knows o' my comin', an' he es nigh square es they make 'em, but et's a leetle best ter be keeful, fer ef a feller gets caught a-doin' his best he can't blame hisself fer what happens. Even Jezebel hes gunption—"

"Thar! some one is comin' up ther trail."

The always alert ear of the ranger had detected a stealthy step a few yards down the trail. The sound was not repeated. After a moment of silence, the cry of a night-jar rung harshly through the darkness.

Jenkins drew a breath of relief. The cry was the signal he had been expecting, and he at once answered it.

"Is that you, Peter?" demanded a voice.

"You bet!—Long Pete!" the ranger replied, dismounting. "An' you are—"

"I am Major Myst," the voice returned, and the speaker advanced with quick, restless strides.

The two men shook hands warmly.

"Come with me," ordered the major, when they had exchanged greetings. "This is hardly the place for a confidential talk. These hills are literally swarming with outlaws, while hostile red-skins are not scarce. We will go down to the camp and slip into my room at the hotel, and no one will be the wiser."

"Sart'inly, ef you think best, major," Long Pete returned. "On'y I don't want ter be seen; et might upset ther boss's plans."

"I'll take care of that," assured the major, and then the two men took their way toward the camp.

On the outskirts of the place, Jenkins tethered his mare in a secluded spot, then followed Myst to the latter's room at the Cherry House.

The move was adroitly performed, and was without witnesses, so far as the two men were able to determine.

When he had secured the door, the major placed a chair for his guest, then produced a demijohn and glasses, saying:

"A little of the oil of joy, friend Peter, to cut the cobwebs out of your throat. Help yourself."

"Thank you, but I never touch ther critter," gravely responded the ranger. "I've seen it down too many good men. By your leave, though, I'll take a pull at my pipe es we talk."

"Fire away," returned Myst, tossing off a stiff glass. "For my own part, I'm fond of a little good liquor occasionally."

"But now that we are under cover and comfortably settled, let's do business."

"You have brought a message from Daunt?"

"Jes' so: hyar et is," and Jenkins drew a

letter from his pocket and placed it in the hands of the major.

"Et will tell ye jest what ther boss wants done," the ranger explained. "Some things he didn't keer ter trust ter paper I'm ter tell ye," and sinking his voice almost to a whisper he spoke rapidly for several minutes.

Myst proved a deeply interested listener. Not a word escaped him. When the tersely expressed statement was finished, he opened the letter and ran his eyes over the written words; but his preoccupied air showed that he gave little heed to what he read.

His eyes gleamed darkly, and there were hard and sinister lines about his mouth. Try as he might to hide his feelings, it was plain that he had heard something of an extremely disagreeable nature.

This fact did not escape Long Pete.

"You say you are not to remain here until Daunt comes?" queried the major, after a moment.

"No."

"May I ask what you intend to do?"

"I'm goin' on ter Gray Wolf."

"In furtherance of this same matter?"

"Yas."

"When will you leave?"

"To-night, es soon es we finish our business," Major Myst uttered a low whistle.

"It's a nasty-road for a night ride," he remarked, his annoyance visibly deepening.

"Et's a bad trail, fer a fact, but I've bin over et before," returned the ranger, complacently.

"Then, too, Jezebel, my mar', hes ther eyes of an owl. Guess I'll risk et, maje, fer this is a matter 'at won't wait."

"Very well, if you know the trail," and Major Myst nodded grimly.

"But if you will excuse me a moment, I'll slip down and send a messenger over to Superintendent Sawyer. He has mapped out a big hunt for to-morrow, but the word you bring will compel him to postpone the trip for awhile. He is one of the few men Daunt can rely upon in a pinch."

Long Pete inclined his head, and his host quit the room.

The moment asked for lengthened into an hour.

Then Myst re-entered the room, in haste and out of breath.

"Pardon my delay," he exclaimed, again filling his glass. "I was compelled to go myself, and Sawyer being absent from his cabin, I had to hunt him up."

"Oh, I've time aplenty," carelessly averred Jenkins. "A half-hour or so either way won't matter much, an' ther later my start from hyar, ther less likely I am ter be seen."

"True; but I am glad my absence has not been annoying to you," Myst returned, resuming his seat.

"About this trip to Gray Wolf—is Daunt expecting help from that quarter?"

"Cain't say; suppose so, though."

"You carry a message?"

"Yas."

"Written?"

"No."

Jenkins was growing reserved, yet maintained an appearance of frankness. With him, caution had become second nature.

"To whom is this message to be delivered?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know! Well, that is singular!" exclaimed Myst, fixing a piercing glance upon the imperturbable face of the ranger. His own visage wore a look of incredulity.

"What is the nature of this message—you can at least tell me that?"

"I could, but I ain't at liberty ter do so," Long Pete bluntly declared. "Ther boss didn't say I wasn't ter tell ye, nor he didn't say I was. In sech cases, I allers keep a still tongue in my head. No harm kin come o' thet, ye know."

"Certainly not," responded the major, gnawing savagely at his nether lip. "But I am quite sure Daunt meant you to tell me all."

"Then it war his mistake in not sayin' so."

There the matter rested. Not another word on the subject could the major get from the ranger.

It was near midnight when the latter rose to depart. Myst offered to accompany him to the spot where the horse had been left, but Long Pete protested against his taking the trouble, adding:

"Thar'd be jest double ther chaine o' bein' seen, too, major. I kin putt my hand on my nag in a jiffy, an' no one ther wiser. So-long, till we meet ag'in!"

"So-long, Jenkins! Luck go with you!"

Closing the door behind his departing visitor, Major Myst caught up the lamp, approached the window and raised the curtain. For a full minute a broad ray of light was thrown into the darkness without, while the major peered sharply in every direction.

"Not a soul visible," he muttered dropping the curtain and replacing the lamp on the table. "But it is a very dark night, and I fear that Peter Jenkins is doomed to meet with a serious mishap!"

And smiling grimly, the major forthwith helped himself to another bumper.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TWO WARNINGS.

ON reaching the street, Long Pete Jenkins stopped a moment and narrowly surveyed his surroundings; then, as there was nothing of a suspicious nature to be seen, he hurried away with noiseless steps and soon gained the spot where he had left his horse.

"I'm a-goin' ter shake ther' dust o' this hyar camp off'n my feet mighty sudden!" he exclaimed, mentally, as he prepared to mount. "Danged ef I don't believe thar's ther biggest kind of a chance ter run up ag'in' a measly brace game. At best things ain't runnin' es smooth es ile! Ef I c'u'd on'y git word ter ther boss—which I cain't 'thout back-trackin', wuss luck!"

Maybe Jenkins swore softly. He was not addicted to profanity, but the "state of mind" he was in was enough to have caused a truly good man to let slip some pretty heavy words.

"Ef I was sure he was in danger— But the boss is no fool, an' he's comin' with ther two eyes ov hisn open. He'll see ther drift. Dang a snake in the grass, anyway!"

The ranger swung himself into the saddle and turned his horse's head straight toward the camp.

"Member ye're walkin' on aigs, Jezebel," he muttered, softly patting the long neck of the animal. "Don't ye cut up any didoes till we're cl'ar ov ther pesky place, or I'll larrup ye till yer bones crack!"

Out into the trail and directly through the camp rode the ranger, his eyes busy with his surroundings. When he had reached the opposite extremity of the place, he drew rein and looked back, listening intently.

Nothing was to be seen, nothing heard, to indicate that he had aroused the suspicion of any of the denizens of Big Ledge.

But, before he could resume his progress, a low, intense voice, coming, apparently, from a clump of bushes bordering the trail, broke the silence, saying:

"Hold a moment, Peter Jenkins! Let me warn you of danger!"

"Enemies are ahead of you, lying in wait somewhere, and before an hour passes others will be hot upon your trail!"

"Beware! The odds are big that you will never reach Gray Wolf camp!"

The tall ranger was startled—startled so deeply that for a full minute he was unable to utter so much as a syllable in reply.

Of what portent was this strange warning?

How had his presence in camp, his very identity, become known?

Had there been a witness to his meeting with Major Myst on the Gopher Lode trail? Or, infinitely worse, had an eavesdropper overheard the conversation in the major's room?

One of those two things, assuredly, or—treachery!

Like lightning, these and kindred thoughts flashed through the brain of the ranger, for the moment rendering him incapable of speech.

"Hallo! hallo!" he exclaimed, at length, vainly striving to get a glimpse of the mysterious unknown. "Who is it speaks?"

A gruesome silence followed the query.

Again Long Pete spoke, and as before no answer greeted him.

"The critter vamosed," he muttered, disappointedly. "I'll not kick, though, for I'll bet big odds he's sarved me a good turn. Ther question now is, what shall I do?"

"Inimies ter ther fore, inimies ter ther rear, an' nary aside-cut short o' Death-Grip Canyon! A purty go, by the Lord Harry!"

"Cain't go back, thet's settled! I've jist got ter git ter Gray Wolf an' back, hot-foot! Yas, et's ther canyon or bust!"

Long Pete urged his horse forward, determined to make the best time possible before reaching the rougher and more perilous portion of the trail. He had every reason to believe that if danger really threatened it would be encountered at a point many miles from Big Ledge, and accordingly advanced boldly.

An hour—two hours slipped by, and Jenkins calculated that he had covered at least fifteen miles. The way was now growing rough and difficult, and unknown perils lurked on every side. Halting close against the face of an overhanging bluff, the ranger gave his horse a breathing spell.

"A mile more, Jezzy, darlin', an' we'll slip out inter Death-Grip Canyon," Long Pete muttered, stroking the dripping neck of the mare. "On'y a mile more, but ther wu'st mile on ther trip! These beggars ain't likely ter leave a chance open fer us ter slip through ther canyon 'thout a tussle fer et! Drat 'em! Ef I hed my good ole pards, Big Dale an' Yuba Dan—Whoa! ye caintankerous critter! What in tarnation's got inter ye now?"

Jezebel had turned half-around, and with ears pricked up stood looking down the trail. Long Pete knew that the action portended danger, and he listened intently.

Not a sound to indicate the approach of man or beast could he hear.

"It's dinged queer," he muttered, after a moment. "Some 'un's comin', though. Jezzy don't make mistakes."

He knelt and applied his ear to the earth.

From down the rude trail came a low, monotonous sound.

"They're comin', an' ther critter in ther bush back thar war right," he exclaimed, springing up. "Ther 'tarnal sneaks! they've muffled ther hosses' hoofs an' are slippin' up hand over hand!"

"But I've got a good five hundred yards' start of 'em, an' ef they overhaul me an' Jezebel they've got ter run lickety-split!"

The ranger's actions kept pace with his thoughts. Flinging himself into the saddle, he urged the mare onward at breakneck speed, determined to hazard all on a bold dash for the canyon. Not once did he look to the rear, but peered sharply ahead, grimly expectant.

Five minutes at that mad pace, then happened just what he had expected, yet dreaded, for out of the intense darkness came the stern hail:

"Halt, critter, an' put up yer hands!"

"Pull trigger, an' we'll shoot ye ter pieces!"

Uttering a growl of disgust, Jenkins drew rein.

"Halt et is, boss," he returned. "Ef et's takin' toll ye're after, et's durned skinny pickin's ye'll get, I reckon!"

"Shet, critter, an' keep shet!" was the gruff retort. "Up, boys, an' close in. Ef he moves or tries any gum games, jest riddle him for keeps!"

A swift rush of feet followed. Confident in their numerical strength, the desperadoes threw caution to the winds.

A half minute, then from the lips of their chief burst a yell of rage and chagrin.

The ranger's saddle was empty!

"Scatter, lads—quick!" came the hoarse command. "Ther critter's vamosed!"

The desperado's assertion was correct. Long Pete Jenkins was out of his saddle and ready for flight afoot even as he responded to the halting hail, and he was fortunate enough to evade the ruffians as they trooped about his horse.

The harsh cry of the chief warned him that there was not a breath of time to waste, and he glided forward, rapidly, stealthily.

A dozen paces carried him to the barricade the desperadoes had placed just within the branching canyon—three tough rawhide lariats stretched from wall to wall. Through these he slipped, pausing only long enough to cut each taut strand nearly in two ere speeding onward with noiseless feet.

A hundred yards thus, at his best pace, then he uttered a whistle—sharp, shrill, penetrating. An answering whiny came from down the trail, followed by clear, ringing hoofstrokes, above which rose a medley of yells and curses and pistol-shots.

Too late had the desperadoes discovered the wily trick played upon them. The weakened lariats snapped like threads before the flying mare, and, untouched by the storm of bullets, she gained the ranger's side.

"Wal done, Jezzy, darlin', wal done!" chuckled Jenkins, springing into the saddle and giving the noble animal free rein. "Now show em a clean pair o' heels thro' Death-Grip Canyon, an' let 'em foller ef they dare!"

At that moment a fresh Babel of confusion rose at the scene of the ambush. The squad of mounted desperadoes had arrived, and query and reply fell thick and fast.

"We've got ter make a dead run fer et," Jenkins muttered, as he caught the sound of muffled hoofs in his rear. "Dang et! ther cusses aire bell-bent on ketchin' me, an' all fer what? Thet some one may make me give up the message I kerry ter Gray Wolf!"

A derisive smile curled his lips. If his pursuers only knew how little he could tell!

"Et's a blind chase they're on, but et's not fer me ter pull ther scales from their eyes!" the ranger chuckled, his grim face relaxing a trifle as the sounds of pursuit grew fainter.

Half a mile after mile fell behind the tireless mare; the canyon grew wider, and the grim walls broke away, shelving terraces and long slopes taking their places.

An hour before dawn Long Pete drew rein and dismounted. Removing the trappings from the mare, he gave her a vigorous rubbing down, then turned her loose to crop the scanty herbage.

Retiring to a sheltered nook hard by, the ranger spread his blanket and with the saddle for a pillow lay down to sleep until sunrise.

With the first gleam of red light on the rocks above him, he awoke and sprung to his feet. A moment of listening convinced him that his pursuers were not in the vicinity, and he hurriedly packed up his blankets, saddled and bridled the mare, mounted and rode forward.

For nearly two hours he kept the mare at an easy lope, skirting the foot-hills, then turned due west to enter a narrow defile leading back into the main range, where the roughness of the way compelled him to reduce his speed to a walk.

Just at mid-day, he drew rein, dismounted and tethered his horse, and climbed briskly to the top of a barren spur jutting from the mountain-side high above the trail.

In plain view, a half-mile to the westward, lay the mining-camp of Gray Wolf.

"Now fer ther message," Jenkins exclaimed, after a careful scrutiny of the distant camp, and with the air of one thoroughly familiar with the task before him he set to work, collecting moss, twigs and dead leaves from the gullies and benches in the mountain-side.

That done, up from the barren crest of the spur rose a dense, black column of smoke, the time-honored signal of the red-man.

For full thirty minutes Long Pete held to his task, feeding the smoldering moss with a careful hand, and then from a point nearly a mile beyond Gray Wolf rose an answering column.

"Ther cuss hes bin expectin' it, an' had everything ready," muttered the ranger, with an expression of satisfaction. "Now, ter get back ter ther boss."

Scattering the fire with a few well-directed kicks, Jenkins hurried down from the spur, secured his horse and at once set about his return to Big Ledge.

All afternoon he pushed on at a steady gait, and shortly before sunset halted for the night in a grassy glade a half-mile off the trail.

The sorrel mare was thoroughly jaded, and stripping off her trappings the ranger devoted half an hour to "rubbing her down," then turned her loose, with a muttered adjuration to be on hand when wanted.

Jenkins had selected a sheltered nook on the edge of the glade as his own resting-place, and after a hearty supper from his provision-pouch, lighted his pipe and smoked awhile, then rolled himself in his blanket and fell asleep.

Day was beginning to show in the east when he was awakened by a light touch on his face, and he sprung to his feet, revolver in hand.

It was a peculiarity of the old ranger that he could see almost as well by night as by day; but now, look which way he would, no sign of an intruder could he discover.

"Et's dinged queer!" he muttered, unconsciously speaking aloud. "I war mortal sure I felt ther tech of a hand—a hand es soft es velvet, too, but et must 'a' bin a dream."

"No, it was not a dream, Lone Pete Jenkins," uttered a voice, low and clear, and unquestionably that of a woman. "You did feel the touch of a hand upon your face, and the hand was mine. I wished to awaken you."

The ranger started and again peered sharply at his surroundings, in a vain attempt to determine whence came that mysterious voice. As before, no one was visible, and he was forced to the conclusion that the speaker was hidden in a clump of bushes a few paces distant.

"You are in danger, and I came to warn you," continued the voice, after a brief silence. "You are going to Big Ledge, and your enemies are in ambush for you at two or three different points along the way. You must abandon the trail, make a circuit and enter the camp from another direction."

"And let me urge you to lose no time, for your friend is there and is in deadly danger."

"Ther dickens he is!" ejaculated Jenkins. "Et's jest what I feared! But, I say, m'am—"

"Call me Kate," interrupted the voice. "I am known as Captain Kate."

"Not ther Lady Bandit?"

"Yes—so called, though I have never harmed an honest man. Like Dell Daunt, I have a mission to perform, and the end must justify the means."

"But I must urge you to hasten, Peter Jenkins, or you'll be too late."

"And, now—adieu!"

A faint rustling in the bushes verified the ranger's suspicions as to the whereabouts of the woman, and a moment later a rapid clatter of hoofs announced her departure.

Calling up his horse, Long Pete lost little time in quitting the glade. On reaching the trail, he waited until sunrise, when he carefully noted his surroundings, then plunged into the pathless hills with the air of one thoroughly familiar with the country.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BICKERING OF WOLVES.

CATCHING the stupefied Sport by the shoulders, Major Myst shook him roughly, without evoking so much as a sign of consciousness.

"Aha! the little powder did its work well," the mine-owner exclaimed, drawing back a pace and again bending upon the sleeping High Card that strange, intense look. "How helpless you now are, Dauntless Dell! How impotent to overthrow your enemies!"

"If I dared! One stroke would end it all, and the Lone Hunter with all its yellow riches would be absolutely mine! Curse it! those new veins have put murder in my heart! But for them, I might have served you well to the bitter end! Now—"

A grating little laugh followed that grimly significant word, and Major Myst's long fingers closed sharply around the knife-handle protruding from his belt. The sleeping Sport was near unto death, just then.

"No, no! The sure way is the safe way," the

mine-owner muttered, moving back from the cot, the better to resist that dire temptation so fiercely assailing his maddened brain. "I'll not give over my purpose, but another hand than mine must clear the way."

"And now, to work!"

Pouring himself a brimming glass of brandy, he swallowed the potent liquor, then secured the room against intrusion, carefully examined his weapons and quitted the hotel.

Straight up the street he strode, with the air of a man bent upon a mission he knew to be dangerous. On the threshold of Riata's Ranch he paused a moment to send a searching glance over that portion of the street he had just traversed, then boldly entered the crowded bar-room.

"So far, so good," he mused, his eyes busy with the faces of the throng. "No spy has dogged my steps, and there is none to suspect my mission. But Dandy Jim is no—"

"Aha! there's that accursed bum, Whisky Bill, hobnobbing with Sandy Parsons! What can that mean?"

And the handsome face of the mine-owner twitched nervously.

But a moment's reflection served to convince Major Myst that his fears, whatever they may have been, were utterly groundless, and with a muttered oath at his vague fancies he pushed his way through the crowd to the rear of the room, where he hurriedly passed the tables supporting the body of the dead detective and entered that part of the building given over to the sports of the camp.

Here the throng was less dense, and after a brief scrutiny of the players at the various tables the major stepped through a side door into the hotel proper.

Ascending to the second floor, he slipped stealthily along the unoccupied hallway and rapped sharply upon a door from beneath which came a ray of light.

The murmur of subdued voices ceased. A moment, then hasty steps sounded within and the door was flung open, disclosing Dandy Jim Crocker and Saul Bartol.

Both men started at sight of the mine-owner, and dropped their hands to the weapons in their belts with a celerity born of long practice.

"Easy, gents!" warned Major Myst, nothing daunted. "Business first, pleasure afterward; horse-sense, then horse-play—if you want it!"

"Oh, we're open for business, major," Dandy Jim blandly returned, rising and coming forward. "You must excuse our hostile attitude; it was an error of the head, not of the heart. You took us completely by surprise, and I must confess that for just a breath I was badly rattled."

"Yes, that expresses the situation exactly," averred Bartol, with a grim little smile. "Come in, Myst, and join us in a glass. It's been all of an age since you did us the honor."

Nodding curtly, Major Myst strode into the room. Passing around the table at which the two men had been sitting, he seated himself with his back to the wall, facing the door.

If they noticed that precaution on the part of their guest, neither Crocker nor Bartol betrayed the fact. On the contrary, Bartol quietly closed and locked the door, while Dandy Jim procured an extra glass from a shelf against the wall, and then with smiling faces both joined the major at the table.

"Your good health, gentlemen!" exclaimed Myst, as he raised the glass to his lips.

"May friendship ripen between us!" Bartol returned, with a covert sneer, and then the three drank.

Putting down his empty glass, Major Myst tipped his chair against the wall and coolly lighted a cigar.

"Surprised to see me, eh?" he chuckled, his bold black eyes shifting from one to the other of the villainous pair. "And why, may I ask, dear friends?"

"And why not?" retorted Dandy Jim, with an angry frown. "Wasn't it enough that you forced that dismal fiasco upon us a bit ago? You balked our game, and we parted as enemies."

"And it takes a bold man to cross Crocker and myself and then deliberately walk into our den!" supplemented Bartol, grimly.

The major uttered a short, hard laugh.

"You are bad boys—both of you!" he sneered, suddenly bringing his chair to a level and looking from one to the other mockingly. "The more so that you admit your game was to snuff out the life of the stranger Sport! If—"

"We admit nothing!" crisply interrupted Dandy Jim. "We acted solely in the interest of law and order."

"Of course!" drawled Major Myst, with an irritating smile and a short nod to each. "I might say something on that line, but what's the use to dwell on the matter? If things come around right, it'll remain a thing of the past forever, and a day to boot!"

"And why cut good time to pieces? Can't it suffice that I know you both—that two blacker-hearted, colder-blooded scoundrels never went unchanged?"

At those bold words, a vicious snarl broke from the heavy lips of Dandy Jim, and he deftly

whipped a revolver from his belt—only to lower it with a grating oath, while Saul Bartol shrunk back in his chair, his dark face convulsed with impotent rage.

For, swiftly as their hands had closed upon their weapons, the attempt to draw was discounted by the iron-nerved major. A single lightning-like motion of his arms, and his trim white hands shot out, each grasping a derringer at full cock!

"Easy! easy!" he warned, softly, yet with a volume of deadly meaning in his purring tones. "Don't tempt me too far!"

Dandy Jim flung up his empty hand.

"Let it pass," he growled. "It's a rough deal, but we'll say it's true; what then?"

Major Myst did not answer immediately. His brows contracted, and with half-closed eyes he looked hard at the two men for a full minute.

Then a wolfish smile disclosed his sharp white teeth, and he replied:

"Simply this; if you are black, I am blacker."

"More than that, I am going to join issues with you and push the game to a close!"

"But what game?" demanded Bartol, sullenly. "You talk in riddles, man!"

"The old game—the game for gold!" was the sneering reply. Then, with a flash of fierceness: "Why whip the devil around the stump? You can't deceive me, and the quicker you begin to talk straight English the better for all concerned. Stand out and make each blow count!"

For just a breath the eyes of Dandy Jim and Bartol met in a glance of strange intentness. Then the former, with a decided shake of his head, exclaimed:

"It's no go, major! We don't catch your drift. You are too deep for us."

Major Myst nodded, and the frown on his face deepened.

"Have it that way, then," he gritted, his fingers toying with the triggers of his leveled weapons. "You simply compel me to repeat a bit of—say ancient history! Shall we call it a truce till I am done?"

Both men gave a muttered assent, and Bartol spoke:

"But, what's the good of so much palaver? You're on the wrong scent, Myst. Neither Crocker nor myself ever saw or heard of this Dell Daunt before this night."

"So?" with a mocking flash of his fierce black eyes. Must I say it, simply because I hold the master-hand? Then have it: *You lie!*

"Now—shut, and stay—*Steady!*" an angry snarl breaking the mellow tones as Dandy Jim and Bartol, goaded into fury by the caustic words, again dropped their hands upon their weapons. *That again, and I'll forget I hold the leash and end it all!*

"Have done, you devil!" grated the man in white, once more cowed into a semblance of submission. "Say your say, then—"

"Then we'll see who takes the bitter dose!" broke in Bartol, viciously. "An even show is all I ask! Now—crowd ahead!"

"Clean business at last!" laughed Myst, settling himself comfortably in his chair and lowering his weapons until his hands rested upon the table. "And here she goes, straight from the shoulder:

"Five years ago, here where now stands this flourishing camp of Big Ledge, was almost a lone wilderness, untenanted save by two hardy, venturesome fellows, prospectors in search of the 'auriferous.' One was an old man, gray-haired and feeble, but a thorough mountain-man, and noted as an expert gold-hunter; the other, yet in the flush of youth, was a tenderfoot all the way from Old Virginia, a gentleman by birth and education, though poor in purse. The first was known throughout the gold regions simply as Old Missouri; his pard answered to the hail of Randolph Coleridge."

"The keen scent of the old mountain-man carried him true, for here the two found the object of their search, and as a result located the claims known to-day as the Golden Horn and the High Horse."

"When every preliminary requirement of the law of the mines had been met, Old Missouri, leaving Coleridge in charge, took the back track to secure men and machinery."

"It was a fatal move."

"Led on by the mountain-man's reputation as a gold-finder, five men had trailed the pair into the hills, and, as soon as Coleridge was alone, shot him from ambush and took possession of the two claims. To make the matter sure, two of the ruffians followed Old Missouri, and came up with him at the edge of a precipice. In the struggle that ensued, the old miner was killed, and his body was flung down into the canyon."

"And now comes the strange part of the tale. Nearly two years after the double murder, a wandering hunter, passing through the canyon, picked up a small oil-skin packet containing a number of letters, all sealed and addressed ready for mailing, and turned them in, with a brief account of their discovery, at the nearest stage station."

"That hunter was Hermit Hart, and of the letters found two were addressed to Mrs. Randolph Coleridge, the daughter of Old Missouri!"

"Do you see whither this bit of history is tending, gents? If not, to let the light through your thick skulls, it may be necessary only to add that the five assassins were yourselves, with Si Haydoc, Billy Briggs and Indian Pete!"

Dandy Jim cowered back in his chair, held at bay only by the pistol-muzzle staring him in the face.

"You lie! you accursed hound!" he grated, in a voice hoarse with murderous fury, his long fingers working convulsively. "I'll tear your dainty throat—"

"Enough said, Crocker!" harshly interrupted Bartol, now the cooler of the two by far, though his dark face was bloodless. "Let's not talk till we can back our words!"

Major Myst nodded a mocking approval.

"That is sensible!" he sneered. "But to continue:

"In due course, the wife of Randolph Coleridge received the letters, together with Hermit Hart's explanation. For more than two years the woman had heard nothing from either husband or father, and that long silence, taken in connection with the hermit's note, hinted so broadly at a dire tragedy that the shock produced brain fever, from which it is said the poor creature rallied but slowly. But when she did recover, it was to find a fortune awaiting her through the death of an uncle, and then the search for vengeance began."

"Why trace it step by step? Isn't it enough to know that her trusted agent, Giddy Norton, or Detective Bridge Gerry, was killed to-night, when on the eve of tearing the masks from your lying faces? Killed, and by whom? Ah, gentlemen, that would be a fine question for good Judge Lynch to decide!"

"Never by our hands, so help me Heaven!" groaned Bartol, feebly, quick to see and realize the peril of the climax hinted at by the cowering major.

"But the motive—the circumstances leading up to the killing! Think you one man in ten thousand could be found to hold you innocent? 'No! your end would be speedy and sure!' and the mine-owner laughed exultantly, seeming to find pleasure in the intense mental torture suffered by the two men."

"That is only one born of the dilemma, however," he continued, after a moment. "You can pay your money and take your choice of the swinging routes!"

"At the time Mrs. Randolph Coleridge received the two letters, her husband's younger brother, Delmonte, chanced to be on a visit from the far Southwest. Without loss of time he hurried here to learn the mystery of Randolph's fate, and in the guise of a miner made his way into Big Ledge; but for over a year your cunning baffled his efforts."

"Then chance befriended him, and one day he came upon Indian Pete down in the gulch at the very spot now marked by the entrance to the Lone Hunter Mine. The ruffian was dying from a knife wound received at your hands, Saul Bartol, and out of revenge made a full confession of the murder of Randolph Coleridge and Old Missouri, and told how and where proof could be found."

"You remember what followed? The two of you came upon the scene just as the ruffian breathed his last. Your suspicions were aroused, and you tried to compel Delmonte Coleridge to give up Indian Pete's secret. He refused, was knocked down and dragged away into the hills, where he was flogged within an inch of his life, finally going down unconscious, but with sealed lips. In that condition, half-naked, torn and bleeding, he was lashed Mazeppa-like upon the back of a maddened horse and hurried away, as you believed, to meet a death as certain as horrible."

"And just there you builded your own ruin. A knife-thrust or a bullet would have rendered you safe for all time, but out of petty revenge you chose the risk of that torturing ride, and—your victim escaped!"

Mutely Bartol and Dandy Jim eyed each other for a moment; then rage got the better of the Titan's prudence, and he fiercely exclaimed:

"Curse it! Saul Bartol, I told you as much the moment I put eyes on that Sport to-night, and you hooted the idea. Come what may, I wash my hands of the job you've botched from first to last!"

"Botched nothing! It's your own pig-headedness that's brought us to book!" snarled the lesser rascal, his curling lips disclosing his sharp white teeth. "Tell me, *where's Randolph Coleridge?*"

The giant winced.

"It's too late for useless recriminations, my boys!" broke in Major Myst, with a sardonic smile. "Let it suffice that I am an independent detective. I have been here over a year in the employ of Delmonte Coleridge, who chanced to be an old friend of mine. At last he has fully recovered from the terrible injuries received at your hands, and is here, hot for vengeance!"

"The question is what are you going to do about it?"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COMPACT.

"WHAT are you going to do about it?"

Major Myst repeated the question slowly and

distinctly, his burning gaze shifting from face to face, striving, it seemed, to read the very thoughts of the guilty pair.

"It's all a lie!" blurted Dandy Jim, after a moment. "Bartol and myself did give the fellow a sharp dose of the leather, but it was simply to make him 'fess up to the murder of Indian Pete. We bought our mines, and we never heard of Old Missouri or Ran—"

"Cork up, you blundering fool!" viciously gritted Saul Bartol, springing half erect and bringing his open palm sharply across the lips of the Titan. "Keep on, and you will rope us both! Leave the talk to me, can't you!"

"Good enough; I'll pass!" muttered Dandy Jim, settling grimly into his chair, his senses recalled by that stinging blow. "It all goes, pardner!" with a wolfish curl of his bleeding lips.

"Then you keep out till I give you leave to open! Say the hound has got the right trail, we yet have the best of the game!"

"And you, major: suppose we admit everything you have charged is true—what then? What are you going to do about it?"

"Hang you high as Haman—if it so pleases me!" calmly enunciated Major Myst. "But—I am not here to make threats; I came to talk business."

"As I have told you, I came to Big Ledge in the employ of Delmonte Coleridge. One of my duties was to hunt out the evidence to hang the murderers of Randolph Coleridge and Old Missouri; but, warned by the suspicious circumstances attending the death of Indian Pete, you had taken effective steps to suppress or destroy the proofs of the crime, and my task was not so easy as we had at first believed it would be."

"Then, to give us a foothold here, and the better to mask my real purpose, I was delegated to open the Lone Hunter Mine—a rich lead discovered by Delmonte only a day before he was driven from the camp. For this latter service I was to hold a one-fourth interest in the mine."

"It is needless for me to tell you that the Lone Hunter has of late been quoted as one of the promising mines in the district; but within less than a week past new veins have been tapped so rich in gold as to more than quadruple the yield. In other words, the Lone Hunter is today worth a round dozen such mines as either the High Horse or the Golden Horn!"

"The devil you say!" ejaculated Dandy Jim, the desperate, despairing gleam in his gray eyes giving way to one of covetous eagerness.

"It can hardly be possible!" Bartol exclaimed, with a sharply drawn breath.

"Ob, yes; I am stating the exact truth," the major affirmed. "And now we're beginning to get right at the heart of the matter, and I warn you to listen closely, for upon your decision it depends whether you shall die at a rope's end or live and wax wealthy!"

"But, to resume: So far as the denizens of Big Ledge know, the Lone Hunter is my property. The claim was entered by me, and I bought the machinery and employed the men. The only possible thing that could dispossess me of the mine is a written agreement existing between Delmonte Coleridge and myself, bearing our signatures and witnessed by a plainsman known as Peter Jenkins and Gray Wolf, a Crow chief outlawed by his tribe."

"Not the red miner after whom the camp of Gray Wolf is named?" asked Bartol, with a slight start.

"The very buck, and he is the shrewdest red-skin I ever attempted to do business with. As the case now stands, Jenkins is dead, or near death, and a very few words spoken in the right quarter would make it soft to bet that Delmonte Coleridge never sees the light of another day, and then between me and absolute security would stand only the life of the Indian chief!"

"Isn't it enough to tempt a man?"

"Yes, yes; but the paper—that agreement?" queried Dandy Jim, moistening his fevered lips. "Might it not turn up to spoil your game and bring you to book?"

"Trust me for that!" laughing lightly. "I never do things by halves!"

A peculiar look crossed Bartol's face.

"You spoke of joining issues with us and crowding the game to a close," he observed, slowly. "You meant what?"

"Business, as you might have learned a good half-hour ago!" was the crisp rejoinder. "You want Delmonte Coleridge out of the way, and so do I. Say the word and I'll point out the way."

"You really mean it?"

"I really mean it. This is no jesting matter. As surely as to-morrow's sun finds Coleridge alive two things will happen: he will possess the Lone Hunter Mine and you fellows will stretch hemp!"

"But the spoils—what division of the spoils will you make?" spoke up Dandy Jim, greedily.

"Nary divide! You keep what you've got, and I'll see that mine doesn't get away. The difference in the value of the claims is more than equalized by the fact that four of you are fighting off the noose."

"And if we decline to accept your terms?" demanded Bartol.

"You can do as you please about that," re-

turned Major Myst, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders. "But in that event I shall remain faithful to Coleridge until you are safely hanged. After that—who knows?"

"Let me add that I am ready for an answer either way. If you accept, well and good; if you refuse, I have only to sound a certain signal to bring up twenty well-armed men to drag you out and string you up to the nearest tree!"

"Now decide, and decide quickly." Again the eyes of Bartol and Dandy Jim met, as if each would read the other's thoughts.

Then: "If I were only certain it is no trap—"

"Don't be a bigger fool than God made you, Jim Crocker!" sternly interrupted the major. "I've preached straight goods from A to Izzard, and I'm here to back my words with hemp or gold—just as you elect."

"Then why did you block the game downstairs?" with a vicious snarl. "If you say true, we were playing right into your hands, and with never a word from you!"

Major Myst laughed mockingly. "And into whose hands would that accursed agreement have fallen? Yours, of course, and I would have been squeezed as dry as a last year's lemon! Trust me to know my business, Dandy Jim!"

"Now, your answer?" Again the expression upon Saul Bartol's face changed, and a gleam of relief shot from his eyes. Putting out his hand, he exclaimed:

"Shake, major! Your game is our game; point out the way, and we'll do the work!"

"And so say I," added Dandy Jim, quick to follow the example of the lesser rascal. "As we're all in much the same boat, I reckon we'd better play pards."

Then Major Myst put up his weapons, and the trio shook hands and drank to the success of their villainous compact.

"Down to business at last!" lightly laughed the major, as he again settled himself comfortably in his chair and relighted his cigar. "Henceforth, Big Ledge shall rejoice in three rulers instead of two!"

"Yes, but this other matter—let us settle that," said Bartol, hastily, a slight frown gathering upon his brows. "I'll never feel safe, now that Coleridge is back in camp, until the game is ended."

"Even now he may be moving against us," he added, his face growing grim and hard at that disquieting thought. "Lay out the course, and let us follow it at once."

"Easy, easy! We've till morning to work," was the cool response. "I took the precaution to 'dope' the gentleman, and he's powerless to lift a finger. Now—"

Major Myst paused abruptly, and looked fixedly at the door, with an evil glitter in his black eyes.

"There's some one outside!" he exclaimed, sinking his voice to a whisper and nodding toward the hallway leading past the room. "Curse it! can we have been overheard?"

Alarmed and dismayed, both Bartol and Dandy Jim sprung to their feet, with weapons in hand; before either could make a move, however, there came a sharp knock at the door.

"That's Whisky Bill!" Dandy Jim exclaimed, with a long breath of relief. "He's been in our pay of late, major, and was to meet us here at this hour. I had forgotten the appointment."

"It won't do for for him to see me here," declared Myst, making a hasty survey of the room, and then gliding behind a curtain stretched across one of the rear corners. "Get rid of him as quickly as possible, for the other matter is pressing."

Nodding assent, the Titan stepped forward and opened the door.

Instead of Whisky Bill, it was Riata Joe who stood in the hallway.

The brutal countenance of the landlord wore a perturbed look, and as the door swung back on its hinges he cast a hasty glance around the room.

"What is it, Riata?"

"Curly Slayback jest brung me word that was some one listening outside yer door, Crocker, an' I slipped up ter see about it," the landlord replied. "But ez I came up the back way, ther galoot slid down ther front stairs with his boots in his hand. I thort best to warn ye afore I went back, for very likely it war some friend o' Myst or his new pard, ef not the major himself."

"Hardly that, Riata, for the major is square enough, if he has taken the wrong side in this matter."

"But I thank you for the warning, and hereafter we'll keep a lookout for such spies."

"And, Riata," spoke up Bartol, "when you go down send out a half-dozen trusty scouts and see if they can't scare up the critter. I'll give an even hundred to the man that catches the sneak."

"That's the talk!" cried the landlord. "But I'm afraid ther cuss hes too much ther start this time," and with a dubious shake of his head the burly ruffian hurried down stairs.

Major Myst stepped from behind the curtain. "I think we have very little to fear from the

eavesdropper, as we spoke in guarded tones," he averred, yet with a doubtful frown on his face. "The mere fact that some one is anxious to hear what we have to say, however, is the best of evidence that we cannot finish our work too quickly."

"The question is, how shall we proceed?"

"Leave Crocker and myself to raise a mob," uttered Bartol, quickly, a wicked glow appearing in his dark eyes. "There are half a hundred men in camp deprived of their pay for two weeks by the robbery of the stage. They will do the work."

"If you can keep your own skirts clear—"

"Trust us to do that!" with savage emphasis. "Give us an hour's time, and the thing will go through with a whirl!"

The major nodded grimly.

"So be it!" he exclaimed. "That will give me room for a little wrinkle I have on hand, and time to spare."

Then, with their eyes on the open doorway, the trio conversed in whispers for several minutes, perfecting the details of their ruthless scheme.

When everything had been arranged, Major Myst took his departure, silently passing down the front stairway and out into the street, while Dandy Jim and Bartol, after carefully locking the door, went down the rear way and through the gambling den into the saloon.

Just below the ranch, the major overtook a drunken miner reeling along toward the cabins at the foot of the slope and in a thick voice muttering praises of Whisky Bill.

The fellow was Sandy Parsons, the man who had sworn the murder of Giddy Norton upon Hermit Hart.

With compressed lips and glittering eyes, Major Myst shrunk back, then with averted face darted by and stationed himself behind a tree in the gloomiest part of the street.

Knife in hand, he awaited the approach of his victim.

"It is a derved shame, boys, but you know just how Crocker and I are fixed. 'We can't risk keeping much money here in camp, and so you'll have to wait two weeks for the stuff. You can get every dollar then—provided, always, the thief doesn't get in his work again!'"

"Ther dirty curs'll never git ther second chance, boys—mind that!" in a sullenly defiant tone. "Et's a clean cinch he got ther bun'le, an' we-uns o' Big Ledge know what thet means! A dead wolf kills no sheep!"

"Don't do anything rash, Curly! Better get the boys to turn back, and give the Sport a fair chance in the morning, when all heads are cool. I haven't a doubt myself the fellow's guilty—"

"Then stand out o' ther way, Saul Bartol! Jestice hes miskerried once too often in this camp, an' this time we take no chances!"

"What say, pards?"

An assenting yell went up from the crowd of roughs, and then under the leadership of Curly Slayback they surged forward with drawn weapons, impatiently thrusting Saul Bartol and Dandy Jim aside.

The two plotters stood silent and motionless until the last man had passed. Then Bartol turned to the Titan with the query:

"What do you think of it, Crocker?"

"It was done adroitly, from first to last! The life of Dell Daunt isn't worth the flip of a copper!"

"But come—let's be in at the death!"

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTAIN KATE, THE LADY BANDIT.

RETURN we now to the Cherry House, and to the apartment in which we have seen the stranger Sport, Dell Daunt, succumb to the powerful drug secretly administered by his treacherous friend, Major Myst.

For several minutes after the departure of the mine-owner, not a sound broke the silence; then there suddenly came a slight clicking noise, and a closet door in one of the walls swung open, and a woman boldly entered the room.

A tall woman, of queenly mien, robed in deepest black and wearing a full mask of some soft, dark stuff, was this intruder, and in her gloved right hand she carried a revolver at full cock.

Her magnetic dark eyes darted a searching glance around the room, and beneath the clinging folds of her mask her red lips curled with bitter satisfaction.

"The scoundrel is indeed gone, and the way is clear to cheat him of his intended victim," she exclaimed, in a low, intense voice, advancing to the side of the cot and peering into the half-averted face of the drugged Sport. "How fortunate that we have of late kept our eyes upon the major, tool! Drugged and insensible, this man—"

The woman ended with a sharp gasp, and started back with her hand pressing her madly throbbing heart, a strange, wild gleam in her beautiful eyes.

"Can it be? No—no! Yet how like, and how unlike!" she faltered, vainly striving to conquer

her agitation. "Heaven help me to endure the bitterness and the hardness of my lot! It is years since that cruel day, but the pain is as keen and bitter now as then."

"And may Heaven nerve my arm to strike for vengeance, for it is all that now remains!"

At that moment a strange thing happened.

The apparently unconscious Sport swung his feet lightly from the cot to the floor, and sat bolt upright!

"Your pardon, lady!" he exclaimed, with a courteous inclination of his head. "I am not dead, nor even sleeping. On the contrary, I am in full possession of all my faculties, and in justice to you I feel that I should make the fact known, lest you speak things you would not care to have another hear."

For a brief space the woman stood in silent amazement. The shock occasioned by the unexpected action of the Sport produced a complete revulsion of feeling, and when he spoke it was calmly and deliberately.

"I am the one who should crave pardon," she returned, with a graceful bow, her voice faint with humiliation, "for I have intruded."

"Do not mention it, pray," remarked Daunt, quickly. "From words you let fall, I know you were inspired by the best and purest of motives—that, in short, you came on an errand of mercy. You have my thanks."

"Yes, that is true," the woman admitted, her dark eyes eagerly scanning the face of the Sport. "And yet, I owe you an explanation."

"I shall be doubly pleased to hear you, lady, from the fact that a man I have long ago regarded as a friend has at last proved false, and it seems likely that your explanation will throw light upon his perfidy," returned Daunt, rising and offering the woman a chair.

"It will, most certainly, if you refer to the person known as Major Myst."

"He is the man."

Bowing slightly, the woman seated herself, and then for a moment seemed to be thinking deeply.

"Do you know who I am?" she suddenly asked, lifting her head and again closely scanning the face of the Sport. "Do you care to hazard a guess at my identity?"

"May I speak frankly?"

"Assuredly."

"Then, lady, I believe you to be Captain Kate, the Lady Bandit."

The woman uttered a bitter laugh.

"You are right!" she exclaimed. "I am that unfortunate creature, and bad enough, Heaven knows, though not so black with sin as some believe or profess to believe."

The Sport bowed.

"My wrongs have been bitter, and my mission is one of revenge," Captain Kate continued. "When I say that, the level upon which I stand must at once become clear to you; for when a woman puts aside the weakness of her sex and turns amazon to hunt down her enemies, demanding a life for a life, she quits a sphere into which she can never re-enter, for the iron must sink deep in her soul, and all that is best and noblest within her dies."

"You judge yourself harshly, madam!"

"No, no! it is the simple truth I speak, and it is better that we both understand as much."

"The men I seek I believe to be here in Big Ledge, and for months past, aided by others in my employ and shielded by the only friend left me, I have used every effort to uncover their crime, but in vain."

"That is all that need be said of myself. Now I shall speak of the treachery of Major Myst."

"Last night Peter Jenkins, your courier, reached this camp, and was brought here by the major. One of my agents gave me timely notice of the fact, and by means of that cunningly-arranged closet I succeeded in hearing nearly all that passed between them. Let it suffice now that, though I heard nothing of personal interest to me, I did learn through the major's actions that he was about to become false to a trust reposed in him. And I believe that Jenkins, too, discovered as much."

After talking a while, Myst withdrew for about an hour, under the plea of consulting his mine superintendent. During his absence my agent kept him under constant surveillance, and learned enough to definitely confirm my suspicions of double dealing, for on quitting the hotel the scoundrel disguised himself and straightway sought out a number of the most desperate men in camp and hired them to waylay and kill Jenkins at a certain point on the trail to Gray Wolf camp.

"This fact was at once communicated to me, and I at once arranged to give Jenkins due warning, so that he escaped the trap set for him."

"Lady, that act alone makes me your friend forever!" cried Daunt, impulsively. "I could never have forgiven myself had that kindly old man gone blindly to his death."

"Now you magnify trifles," gravely returned Captain Kate. "But let it pass, for time is pressing. Major Myst may return at any moment, and we must be prepared to act when he appears."

"One word—it was from you, then, that I received that warning note to-night?"

"It was by my instructions, yes. It was delivered to you by my agent, Bolly Darrit."

"The bravest, shrewdest old sleuth-hound in the Rockies!"

"He is making headway where others failed," the woman averred. "But it is slow, slow work, for the miscreants have most skillfully covered their bloody trail."

"But to return to our subject: I decided to be on hand again to-night, for I suspected the major would attempt some unscrupulous trick. From his words I inferred that he had succeeded in drugging you, and so made my appearance. You may be assured that I was surprised to find you conscious."

"It might have been otherwise but for that warning note," the Sport declared, his brows knitting ominously. "To test the matter, I acted a part and, presto! the fish was hooked!"

"The question is, what is to be done? The wretch left here with the avowed intention of seeking a tool willing to finish the job, and I must so arrange the matter as to catch both dead to rights in their game."

"You will observe, Captain Kate, that I am taking you into my deliberations. I feel that your shrewdness and wit are fully equal to the occasion, and that with your assistance in arranging a plan I shall be able to treat the major to a most disagreeable surprise."

A vivid gleam shot from the dark eyes of the woman, and then she averted her face to conceal her agitation.

"The task will not be at all disagreeable to me," she asserted, after a moment, frankly meeting the gaze of the Sport. "I must confess that I feel impelled to lend you all the assistance in my power."

"And I shall be pleased to have your help, so long as it does not lead you into danger," Daunt declared. "You certainly have my warmest sympathies, for I am here on a mission similar to your own, and at any time I can be of service to you, don't hesitate to mention it. I, too, must own that I am drawn toward you by a strange and subtle influence."

"Then, to use the vernacular, we shall be 'pards'," exclaimed Captain Kate. "That is, secret pards, helping each other from time to time, without betraying the fact that we have ever met."

"Exactly."

The allies shook hands warmly.

"Now let us settle the plan of the present campaign," continued the woman, abruptly. "Darrit is watching Myst, and will probably return fully informed as to the major's intended movements. Moreover, Darrit will be here in advance of Myst, and as soon as the detective reports I will communicate the situation to you, and we shall be prepared to act intelligently."

"Pursuing that course, we can do nothing decisive until Bolly Darrit arrives," remarked the Sport, reflectively. "But it strikes me as the best plan, for it would be folly to expose our hands until we have the major just where we want him."

"That is the idea, exactly."

"Yes. I have decided to punish the scoundrel for his treachery, and when I strike I want the naked facts of the case to sustain my course," and a dark look crossed the face of the Sport.

"The plan comes to me now. Myst will return before his hirelings appear, for I have in my possession a paper he must obtain, or run the risk of losing all he is scheming to gain. Leaving that closet door slightly ajar, you can witness the fact that he takes the paper; and then, when his men appear, we can nab one of them and squeeze him into disclosing the whole game."

"Caught with that paper in his possession, and with the evidence of his captured accomplice dead against him, the major must be slippery indeed to clear his skirts."

Captain Kate nodded her approval, then said:

"But if the paper is valuable, is it not risky to let it pass into the major's hands even for an hour or so? The chances are he'll lose little time in getting it safely out of the way."

"As to that, I shall adopt the major's tactics and resort to trickery," the Sport replied, taking from the breast pocket of his coat a large bill-book, and from that a long envelope, unsealed. "This paper is the agreement between the major and myself governing the development of the Lone Hunter Mine. With this in his possession and the two witnesses out of the way, the scamp could laugh at any claim I might set up."

Taking out the agreement, Daunt inserted a carefully folded sheet of bluish paper, then sealed the envelope and passed it to Captain Kate for inspection.

Written upon it in a cramped and irregular hand was the following:

"[Original.]"

"ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN DELL DAUNT, OF TOP NOTCH, BOISE COUNTY, IDAHO, AND MAJOR MYST, OF DENVER, COLORADO."

"You would be able to identify that paper anywhere?"

"I would know the envelope anywhere," the woman replied, returning the document to the Sport. "But suppose the major takes time to investigate before departing with his supposed prize; what then?"

"It will make trouble—for him," was the significant reply, as Daunt thrust the sealed envelope into the breast pocket of his coat.

"And now, Captain Kate, I want you to take charge of the real agreement and of this bill-book until I have squared accounts with the major."

The woman shook her head.

"I would prefer that you let me turn them over to Mrs. Kate Cherry, the landlady, for safe keeping," she returned. "The life I am leading is apt to get me into serious trouble at any moment, and for that reason, if none other, your property would hardly be safe in my hands."

"You can put absolute trust in Mrs. Cherry. She is the friend I spoke of awhile ago, and I know her to be thoroughly reliable in a matter of this kind."

"Very well," asserted the Sport. "There is a chance, you know, that in this joust with the major I may come out at the little end of the horn, and in that event I want the papers to fall into the hands of my friends."

"Kate Cherry will see that they reach the right parties," Lady Bandit declared, rising with the bill-book in hand.

"But before I go, Mr. Daunt, there is one thing I wish to call your attention to—a secret means of escape in case your enemies appear in greater force than you are expecting. Enter that closet and turn to your right. In the end wall, slightly higher than your head, is a large nail. Press sharply against it, and a door will open, letting you into a narrow corridor, from which a flight of steps lead down to a like passage below, where you will find some one in readiness to let you out of the hotel."

"Now I will carry this book to Kate, with your request. I may decide to wait the detective's return below, but you may depend upon my presence in the closet when Myst appears."

Daunt opened his lips to speak, but at that instant the faint tinkling of a bell came from below.

"It is Darrit's signal!" exclaimed the woman. "He is here and in haste."

"Now be on your guard!"

In another minute the Sport was alone.

CHAPTER X.

IN DANGER.

"HERE is a remarkable state of affairs," soliloquized Daunt, seating himself on the edge of the cot from which he had risen. "I am trusting my life and my fortune to a woman I have known scarcely an hour, and that woman an outlaw by repute if not in deed!"

"And now that the step is taken, I have no qualms of conscience—no desire to undo what is done, so perfect is the faith inspired by this Captain Kate."

"It seems, somehow, as if I had known her all my life, and I certainly would put myself to considerable trouble to do her a favor."

"I cannot understand it at all. Did I not know that it was utterly beyond the possibilities, I should imagine that I was falling in love with my mysterious pard!" and a bitter smile curled the red lips of the Sport.

Then for several minutes he remained with his head bowed in thought, his handsome face cold and stern, his deep blue eyes filled with a light not good to see.

"This tricky deal of the major's upsets all my well-laid plans," he exclaimed, at length, in a tone just audible. "He has all the evidence in his possession, and so it must all be hunted out again. He will hold it as the price of his liberty; and, as I am resolved to mete out full and due punishment to the dastard, we cannot come to terms."

"Among them, they have cast a pall over my life that can never be lifted, and here I shall remain, to haul them down, be the odds what they may!"

Then a startling thought whirled through his brain, and he sprang to his feet with clinched hands and blazing eyes.

At that moment the closet-door opened and Captain Kate again entered the room.

"There is but little news, and that bad," she announced in a suppressed tone. "Darrit laid in wait for the major and trailed him to the room of Dandy Jim Crocker and Saul Bartol, where the three held a long conference—are still talking, in fact. The mine-owners have quarters at Riata's Ranch, and owing to the watchfulness of Riata Joe, the detective was unable to hear much that passed between them: but from the little he did gather, it would seem that Myst is attempting to force the others to join hands with him, and if he succeeds, you will have the worst to fear."

"It had just occurred to me that he would attempt something of the sort," the Sport exclaimed. "Both Crocker and Bartol are decidedly unfriendly toward me, and as the major

happens to have the whip hand over them, he has determined to compel them to do his work.

"And on the whole, I am rather glad that it is so. It may force a short cut to the end I have in view."

"You must be on your guard," warned Captain Kate, speaking slowly. "All three are cunning, as well as unscrupulous, and when they strike, you may depend upon it the blow will be a secret one, well-nigh impossible to trace to them."

Daunt shrugged his shoulders.

"They are cunning knaves!" he admitted. "I have discovered that to my sorrow. But if I can succeed in holding my own for a few days, I know a trick that will forever break them of playing with fire."

"Darrit made another discovery of a very disquieting nature," the woman continued, abruptly. "It seems that Peter Jenkins is by no means out of danger."

"A number of the major's agents are camped down the trail, waiting to ambush the old man on his return from Gray Wolf Camp."

As may be imagined, this bit of information was anything but cheering. The face of the Sport grew dark with anger.

"The inhuman dastards!" he gritted, his blue eyes glowing luridly. "Is there no crime so enormous as to stay their ruthless hands?"

"They will stop at nothing now," declared the woman, "and nothing but prompt action can possibly save him; for, infuriated by his escape on the up-trip, the miscreants have taken every precaution to insure their complete success when he returns."

"I have planned to balk them, and have instructed Darrit to take my place in the closet during your seance with Major Myst, and will get my horse and start immediately."

Daunt uttered a slight cry of astonishment.

"You go over the Gray Wolf trail to-night!" he exclaimed. "Captain Kate, I cannot permit the fulfillment of your pledge at such a terrible risk as that!"

"No, no! I shall await until the major has come and gone, then myself ride on to warn Jenkins."

"And be riddled with bullets for your pains!" returned the woman, the folds of her mask hiding the odd expression that for the moment crept into her face.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Daunt, that both myself and my horse are thoroughly familiar with the Gray Wolf trail, and that for us there is little if any danger in the trip."

"Moreover, if I am not greatly mistaken, affairs here in Big Ledge during the next few hours will require your undivided attention, if you expect to play a winning game."

"That is true enough, Captain Kate, but I would throw up the game before deliberately losing Jenkins his life or putting yours in such jeopardy."

"Oh, that is no way to talk!" protested the Lady Bandit, stoutly. "I can take care of Jenkins's life and my own, too. You attend to this business in camp, and leave the other to me. I want to see you win, and I am willing to confess that it is from purely selfish motives, too, for I expect to profit by your success."

"You know that I am here alone, almost, fighting a hard fight. One of these days I shall succeed in cornering the enemy, and when it comes to the finishing stroke I shall want some one back of me whose influence will strengthen my cause."

"I know that the Lone Hunter is by long odds the richest mine in the camp, and that its owner will hold almost absolute sway. Therefore, if you establish your claim to the mine, you will shortly be the most powerful man in Big Ledge, and the one whose influence I should desire."

"You see, I am perfectly frank about the matter. I know precisely what I am doing, and as I am a free agent you cannot blame yourself for any risk I may choose to assume to help along your fight."

The Sport smiled grimly.

"No, I suppose not—putting it in that light," he admitted. "But you are beating away from the main point. Aside from the risk you would run, there is a good reason why you should not undertake the trip."

"You would be unable to find Jenkins, and so would not accomplish your purpose."

"And on the other hand, I know exactly where to find him at any hour between this and morning. I know that he is camped for the night in a little glade a half-mile off the trail, perhaps two miles above the upper outlet of Death-Grip Canyon. We were very careful in planning this campaign, so that each might know just where to find the other at a given time, barring accidents."

"And this glade is a half-mile east of the trail," observed the woman, narrowly watching the Sport. "It is an ideal camping place, with water, grass and fuel in abundance; and, best of all, it is so hemmed in by the surrounding hills as to afford the greatest seclusion."

Daunt started.

"You know the place?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I have camped there on several occasions. More than that, I know a secret route

to that very spot, and can reach it in less than three hours."

"You had better withdraw your objection, Mr. Daunt, and permit me to do the errand."

"Well, you are a pard worth having!" the Sport exclaimed. "If you can avoid the danger of the ambush, you have my consent, for I admit that with the errand in good hands I would prefer to remain right here in Big Ledge."

"I will at no time be within a mile of the thugs sent out by Major Myst," declared the Lady Bandit.

At that moment the tinkling of the bell again sounded through the house.

Daunt looked inquiringly at the mysterious visitor.

"The major has entered the hotel," the woman tersely explained. "I will give way to Darrit in the closet. If it comes to an open case, his evidence would carry greater weight than mine."

Again the secret pards shook hands, and then Captain Kate disappeared within the closet, leaving the door slightly ajar, while Dell Daunt extended himself at full length on the cot, in the exact position in which Major Myst had last seen him.

These moves were executed just in time, for in another minute the door was unlocked and flung open, to admit the desperate schemer.

A single glance at the major would have convinced one that he was fresh from a trying ordeal. His face was grim and white, and a fitful glare filled his dark eyes. His steps were unsteady and his hands shook nervously.

Closing the door and turning the key in the lock, Myst cast a hurried look around the room, then strode straight to the side of the apparently unconscious Sport.

"The drug still holds him fast," he muttered, bending forward and peering sharply at that white, half-averted face. "How fortunate that I possessed it!"

At that instant, the echoes of a distant yell, shrill and penetrating, interrupted the major's musings, and he started and shrunk back, as if suddenly confronted by an apparition.

Too well he knew the significance of that sound!

Saul Bartol and Dandy Jim had succeeded in their mission of evil—had aroused to murderous fury the disappointed roughs!

He knew, too, that there was yet time to retreat, to abandon his devilish purpose and save the seemingly helpless Sport; but all that was bad within him rose in opposition to such a course, and with grimly compressed lips and burning eyes he viciously fought back that merciful impulse.

"The game has gone too far!" he gritted, and again bending forward he rifled the pockets of his victim, assured himself that he had secured the coveted document, and hastily quitted the room, leaving the door unlocked.

Dell Daunt uttered a soft little laugh, half-earnest, half-mocking, and sprang to his feet.

"Are you there, Bolly Darrit?" he called out, turning toward the closet, the door of which stood slightly ajar. "Did you see the major's performance?"

"Oh, yes; I'm right here, and I watched every move the jackal made," the detective returned, in a muffled voice. "I reckon if he's not mighty careful we'll have him in an extremely nasty fix before many hours."

"What, do you think, will be his next move?"

"That I can hardly say. As Captain Kate doubtless told you, the vigilance of Riata Joe thwarted my attempt to overhear the plans of the rascal, and I am fully as much at sea in the matter as you are."

"It seems to me, though, that he has certainly adopted one of two courses—either hired an assassin to steal into your room and finish you, or turned the matter over to Bartol and Crocker."

"If he has chosen the first course, the plan outlined by you and Captain Kate will doubtless work to a charm. We can seize the cut-throat and force a confession from his lips that will effectually dispose of the major."

"But if Myst has joined forces with Bartol and Dandy Jim and turned over to them the job of getting you out of the way, as I strongly suspect he has, we're likely to have a mighty rough time. Both mine-owners are dangerous men, the more so from the fact that they absolutely control a large element of this camp's population. If they have taken hold of the matter, they will be very likely to operate through a mob."

"That is the very thing we must guard against," Daunt exclaimed, after a moment's reflection. "All the conditions are favorable to just such a proceeding on the part of Myst. I happen to know that he is in a position to compel Dandy Jim and Bartol to do his will, and by that course he would conceal his agency in the matter from all but the two mine-owners, who, to protect themselves, would have to keep quiet."

"Yes, yes; that is his little game, and now comes the all-important question, what are we going to do about it?"

"Well, Sport, we've hardly time to ponder the matter very deeply," Darrit replied. "But I would suggest that you simply keep quiet un-

til you are absolutely sure just which way the festive feline is going to jump. If it comes to a mob, you'd better take Captain Kate's advice and get out of the hotel by this secret stairway, and keep shady till the thing quiets down a bit."

"Of course you don't have to take my say—not a bit of it; but a mob's a mighty tough thing to buck ag'in'. Once in awhile you hear of some sandy galoot making a bold stand and bluffing a crowd out of their boots, but it's always on paper. About nine hundred and ninety-and-nine times out of every thousand that a fellow touches a job of that heft he gets beautifully left."

"Oh, yes; it's the height of folly to jump into a game of that kind," assented the Sport, in a peculiar tone. "Sometimes, though, a man has to take his chances just that way."

"Well, it's a heap sight safer and pleasanter for a fellow to get away while he can do it easily," Darrit averred.

"And now, Sport, I'm going below to keep an eye on things. If I find it's only one or two men got the job in hand, I'll pull the bell once to put you on your guard, and then come up to give you a lift. But if she rings twice, quick and sharp, you may know it's a mob and you've got business somewhere else."

"Very well," returned Daunt, quickly, and then a succession of faint sounds told him the detective was quitting the closet.

Carefully reloading his revolvers, the Sport turned the lamp low, raised the curtain and hoisted the lower sash of one of the windows overlooking the street.

At that moment two sharp peals of the bell rung through the house.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTURED.

"AHA! that means business, pure and simple!" Dell Daunt exclaimed, as the ringing notes of the bell died away. "Now to see from what quarter and in what force the belligerent knaves are approaching."

Taking his stand at the open window, the Sport peered out.

The night was clear and starlight, but the shadows of the surrounding hills lay dense and black over the camp, shutting out from view objects at a distance of less than a dozen paces.

The hotel was closed, and not a ray of light pierced the gloom.

"I shall have to trust to my ears," mused Daunt, after a vain attempt to pierce that inky pall. "It is unfortunate, too, for I had hoped to size up the leaders of the mob."

"Ah! there they come!"

True enough; up from the abysmal darkness came the heavy tramping of feet, and the murmur of subdued but angry voices.

For several minutes these sounds continued, and then a thunderous knocking at the door jarred through the house.

"Open! open!" sternly ordered the leader of the mob, as the clamor ceased for a moment. "Do ye hear, Kate Cherry? Open the door, for we mean business!"

Kate Cherry, the landlady, had been sitting in the hotel office, quietly awaiting that very summons.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she returned, rising and approaching the heavily barred door, her voice ringing out clear and cold. "Say it quick, too. The hour is late, and I've no time for idle words."

"You open that door, Kate Cherry!" sharply commanded the spokesman of the waiting roughs. "Ef you're in a hurry, so're we, but when I talk I reckon ye'd better find time ter listen."

"I'm Curly Slayback, an' I'm chief o' the Big Ledge Vigilantes. We want the strange Sport Major Myst brung ter your house to-night, an' we want 'im bad!"

Kate Cherry laughed disdainfully.

"So it is you, Curly Slayback!" she exclaimed, her voice half-earnest, half-mocking. "I thought as much, the moment you spoke."

"Now, about the strange Sport: to the best of my knowledge, he is no longer in this house. He was warned of your coming a good half-hour ago; and as no man in his sober senses would care to remain and face such a gang of drunken loafers, I presume you'll have to look elsewhere."

"In any event, I do not intend to open my doors to you, as I know to my cost that on an occasion like this you and your men have an unhappy penchant for carrying off anything and everything of value you can get your thievish hands upon."

A moment's silence followed the woman's bold words, and the listening Sport smiled grimly.

Then the rage of the crowd found vent, and the air was filled with execrations loud and deep.

"You are mighty brash, Kate Cherry—you are!" howled Curly Slayback, as soon as he could make himself heard. "But jest bekase you're a woman you mustn't think we'll let ye

say sech things ag'in' us! We're honest men, we are, an' we're in s'arch o' justice. You've got a pesky thief in your house an' we're goin' ter hev him!

"An' now you open that door, or down she goes!"

"And down you'll go with it!" was the resolute retort. "Don't attempt to crowd me, Curly Slayback, for I am armed, and I feel wicked enough to do mischief!"

"The Sport is gone, but even were he here you could not enter to take him, for I want you to distinctly understand, sir, that under no pretext do you put foot in my house."

"Now, clear out!"

"Oh, yas! we'll cl'ar out!" sneered the ruffian. "All you've got ter do is ter say *git*, an' we gits! We're built jest that way—in a horn!"

"No, no! ye cain't pull no wool over our eyes, Kate Cherry. We meant business, when we went inter this hyar leetle game, an' all of an hour ago we putt guards 'round the house an' ther stables, an' so we know our man's in thar yet."

"Nor that ain't all nor ther wu'st of et, Katie! I reckon es Vigilantes we've got a leetle score ter settle with you, too, fer we've dropped onter ther fact that ye're hand in glove with Captain Kate, ther Lady Bandit—ef ye're not ther ow-dashus critter herself!"

The Sport listened intently to catch the woman's reply, for the same idea had occurred to him.

But Kate Cherry remained silent.

Two or three minutes dragged along quietly. Then Slayback uttered an order in a low tone.

A swift rush of feet followed, and a heavy crash boomed through the house.

"They are battering down the door!" Daunt ejaculated, unconsciously speaking aloud. "I must go below and offer my services to the landlady. She has fought my fight so far, with the result that she is now in more danger than I am. It is too late to retreat now, if I would."

"You are right, sir. It is indeed too late to retreat," uttered a musical voice, and Kate Cherry stepped from the closet into the room. "Our only chance is to drive them back, then slip down to the stables, mount and make a dash for it."

"Darrit has gone?"

"Yes—at my request, as he can do more real service out there than in here. He is thoroughly disguised, and is generally regarded by the roughs as one of their number. Under such conditions, he easily slipped out and through the line."

At that moment a second terrific blow against the door shook the building.

"The knives are certainly determined to force their way in," observed the Sport.

"Oh, yes; Slayback is an obstinate rascal," Kate Cherry returned. "But he will find that to force an entrance through that door is no light task. It was built to withstand just such an attack."

Daunt was silent a moment.

"Where are your guests?" he asked suddenly.

"I have but two besides yourself and the major," the woman replied; "and by some freak of fate or fortune both happen to be absent."

"And the servants?"

"Both are away. I hurried them off at the first breath of trouble, as I could depend upon neither."

"Then we are alone in the house."

"Absolutely alone."

Again that dull, crashing blow rung out, and this time was followed by a hoarse, triumphant yell from the mob.

"That door is yielding," declared Daunt. "Within five minutes they will be in the building."

"Lady, can you escape alone?"

"Alone? Yes, there is a chance, but I had better not."

"No matter about the promise. If you can make your way out, do so. I see my way clear after that. So go now, and I will cover your movements."

The woman hesitated, then yielded and hurried down the secret stairway.

Crossing the room, the Sport seized the lamp and carried it to the open window. Hastily thrusting his handkerchief into the top of the chimney, he turned the wick high up, inverted the glass bowl, and flung it into the midst of the crowd.

A single warning yell, then came a brilliant flash, quickly followed by a loud explosion. The mob scattered right and left, skulking back from the glow of the burning oil.

"Even better than I expected!" muttered the Sport, his keen blue eyes busy with the scene below, while he kept out of range of the window. "In fact, I may say it was a brilliant success," smiling grimly.

"They are all there, too—Dandy Jim, Bartol and the rest. Curse them! they do well to heat back to cover, for I'm in the mood for throwing lead!"

A moment thus, then the light died out, and the tramping of booted feet announced the return of the roughs, and the assault upon the door was renewed with redoubled fury.

With noiseless tread Daunt crossed the room to the window overlooking the shed roof mentioned earlier in the evening by Major Myst. Putting aside the curtain, he softly raised the lower sash and looked out.

A brief scrutiny dispelled his suspicions that the roof was guarded, and, stealthily slipping through the window, the Sport lowered himself to the sloping boards, where he sunk upon his hands and knees and crept toward the rear of the building.

On reaching that point he paused a moment, with every sense on the alert, then stole down the roof, swung himself over the edge, and dropped lightly to the ground.

As his feet touched the earth Daunt drew a long breath of relief, and deftly loosened the weapons in his belt. That deadly peril now lay before him he well knew.

"Hist! be wary, now!"

In strains so low as to be almost inaudible came that terse warning, and the startled Sport shrunk back a pace, then braced himself, knife in hand, just as a bulky form glided around the corner of the building and paused before him.

"You are—"

"I am Darrit!" guardedly. "Come—let us get away from here. The door is down, and in another minute it will be known you have escaped, and the beagles will be hot on your trail."

"But Kate Cherry?"

"Out an' gone!" impatiently. "Don't tarry, man! The devils are in ambush all around us, an' my head ag'in' yours, we'll rue it if we lose another half minute!"

"Move, then. I am—"

"Look out!"

Too late! Even as that hasty warning escaped the lips of the Sport, a dozen shadowy forms rose from the earth in obedience to a sharply-uttered signal and flung themselves upon the two men with all the fury of hungry tigers.

And so deftly executed was that maneuver of the enemy that neither Dell Daunt nor the detective could find time to draw and use a weapon ere they were struggling in the clutches of the ruffians.

A moment of hand-to-hand fighting, then a heavy blow from the butt of a revolver brought the Sport to his knees, half-senseless. He struggled gamely to rise, but in vain. With howls of mingled rage and triumph, the roughs pressed upon him, and in another minute he was bound and helpless.

Darrit, however, fared better. Foot by foot, with stubborn ferocity, he fought his way, his ponderous arms and legs working like flails, until he had forced a passage directly through the howling throng. Then, beating down the last of his assailants, he skurried away in the darkness, followed by a harmless volley.

"Follow, hotfoot!—you, Pawnee, an' you, Windin' Blades!" fiercely snarled the leader of gang, as he spat out a tooth loosened by the heavy fist of the detective. "He's hand an' glove 'ith ther 'agent, an' deserves the rope—ther durned bunk o' soapfat! Don't let 'im escape! Take 'im, dead or alive!"

A burst of imprecations followed the furiously-uttered sentences, and the two desperadoes addressed darted away in the direction taken by the fleeing detective. Neither dared disobey the raging bully.

"Now, up with ther 'agent, boys, an' trot him 'round ter Slayback," continued the chief, striving hard to pierce the darkness with his glowing eyes. "Hurry, too, fer ther hull b'illin' are comin' right this way, an' we must hustle ter make our claim clear."

"Et's mebbe a cool hundred out o' this garg's pockkets ef we fail ter git thar," supplemented a burly desperado. "Don't let 'em ketch us at a stand-still, pard, or some o' ther durned galoots 'll jump in an' call sheer an' sheer alike—ef they don't make a grab fer ther bull pot!"

A subdued growl of assent came from 'the roughs, and jerking the Sport to his feet they hurried him toward the front of the hotel, pushing directly through the on-coming crowd attracted by the sounds of the brief struggle.

At the corner of the building they encountered the Vigilante chief, Curly Slayback, and the capture of the Sport was at once announced.

"We've turned a mighty neat trick, and I reckon we'll take that leetle reward," cried Red Rufe, the leader of the gang, as he delivered up the prisoner. "An' o'ny fer us, ther galoot 'ud 'a' give leg-bail, ter boot."

"Oh, we've 'arned ther yaller-boys, an' they's yours," Slayback replied, tossing the fellow a bag of coin.

"An' now, Red Rufe, do you an' Blinky Dargan help me git the critter over yender ter Judge Lynch's oak; an' while we're at et, hev yer men call up all ther boys. Thar's lots o' pestiferous citizens et may be a warnin' to!"

Red Rufe obeyed, and the captive Sport was half-dragged, half-carried to Judge Lynch's oak, a huge, lightning-riven tree standing in an open space near the center of the camp. From the earliest days of Big Ledge, this tree had done service as a gallows, and under its lifeless branches the Vigilante chief intended to hang Dell Daunt.

CHAPTER XII.

EXILED.

As the steadily-growing crowd surged toward the blasted oak, a burst of flame, shooting up from the rear of the hotel, cast over the stirring scene a lurid glow, which quickly deepened and brightened until it brought into clear and full relief nearly every visage in the moving throng.

At that first flush of red light, Dell Daunt started, and his teeth grated audibly. Without so much as a backward glance, he realized the truth.

The Vigilantes had fired the building!

"Curses on the dastards! Because Kate Cherry befriended me, they have destroyed her property!"

Even as that thought whirled through the brains of the Sport, his captors halted beneath the oak, and Slayback called for a rope.

Grim, silent, keenly alert, his blue eyes gleaming like living coals, the doomed Sport glanced from face to face, vainly searching for his arch-foes, Major Myst, Dandy Jim Crocker and Saul Bartol—covertly straining at his bonds until the perspiration stood in beads upon his white forehead.

"Don't ye do et, Mr. High Card—don't!" mocked Slayback, quick to detect Daunt's desperate effort to free himself. "Reckon ye're booked fer a clear home-run, an' ye'll look a durned-sight better when ye land thar ef ye jest keep cool an' smilin'! An' ef et's on'y exercise ye're wantin', ye kin give yer laigs a-plenty in jest a minute!"

The Sport smiled placidly.

"Don't you worry, my pretty boy!" he retorted, softly. "But if I wanted any pointers as to 'laig' exercise, you're the man I'd seek—thank you!"

The Sport's manner, rather than his words, provoked an audible titter, and Slayback grew red to the ears.

"What d'ye mean by that!" he blustered. "Ye don't dar' hint—"

"Oh, I didn't hint anything. I simply meant that if your face was in danger your legs would run away with your head—that's all!"

The titter grew into a guffaw.

Among the more peaceably inclined of the camp's denizens Slayback was heartily detested as a swaggering, cowardly bully. Many of these men were now present, and, while they entertained no idea of interfering with the red work of the Vigilante chief, they were prompt to attest their appreciation of the plainly-stated truth.

For fully a minute Slayback stared at the Sport as if he could hardly believe his ears. Then:

"D'ye mean thet, pilgrim? Sure ye ain't jokin'?"

"Dead sure—so sure, in fact, that I'll bet you a hundred to one I can force you to sprint if you'll take off these ropes!"

"Yes—sprint *after* you!" sneered the desperado. "No, no! ye don't ketch me that-a-way, Mr. High-Card!"

"Et's a dead sure cinch ye putt hooks on ther money ther huss brung in, an' up ye go! We don't take no chainces!"

Some one had thrown a rope over one of the limbs of the oak, and as Slayback finished speaking he caught the loose end and deftly formed a noose, which he slipped over the head of the helpless Sport.

"Thar's yer necktie—wear et!" he grated, his eyes flashing vengefully.

"Up, boys! Swing—"

"Hold! mos' lordly suzerain, sap-headed satrap an' envoy extra-ornery o' his satanic majesty o' ther lower regi-uns!—hold!" interpolated a wheezy, bellowing voice, as through the throng a man of short and bulky figure forced his way, to halt beside the Sport and sever the rope with a single sweep of a glittering blade. "Hold, my royally cute curs from Jimplecute, till I, Whisky Bill, a man o' honor an' a gentleman still, tho' a bit down et ther heel, doth orate a few simple facts inter thine expansive auricular appendages, 't'otherwise known as years! Then, an' not till then, do this execution proceed—by gad!"

The singular personage who thus forced his way through the crowd and to the side of the imperiled Sport, was, as stated, a man of short and bulky figure, yet one possessing wondrous agility and prodigious strength. His hair and beard were a fiery red—the hair tangled and matted, the beard coarse and bristling and reaching almost to the deep-set, gleaming blue eyes.

His clothing was of the nondescript order—ragged, greasy, and covered with odd-looking patches of various colors and as many different materials, and he wore a battered white hat and huge, badly-worn top boots.

But his weapons were first class, the revolvers in his broad leather girdle being solid, reliable tools, while the bowie he brandished in the face of the Vigilante chief was as handsome a specimen of the steel-worker's art as man often sees. And there were men in Big Ledge, too, ready and willing to swear that this dirty, disreputable-looking old vagrant could use knife and pistol

with all the skill and dexterity of a professional master-at-arms.

"What say? Will ye listen, an' let ther crowd pass on ther truth of my say-so?" he hissed, that burlesque air giving place to one of deadly menace, his blue eyes glittering with a devilish light as he abruptly craned his bullet-head forward and brought the keen point of the gleaming blade squarely against the scrawny throat of Curly Slayback. "Understand this, too: ther Sport's no friend o' mine; but he's innocent, an'—I've seed many jest like him strung up out o' pure cussedness!

"An' now—speak quick! I'm a butcher by trade, an' my blood b'iles ter stick a bog, be et two-legged or four!"

Every word uttered by that harsh, whoozy voice reached the ears of the motionless throng—every move was distinctly visible in the glow of the burning hotel; yet not an effort was made to avert what at any instant might become a bloody tragedy, for not a man of all the scores grouped around failed to realize the exact truth—that not even a bullet in the brain of the vagrant could save Curly Slayback should Whisky Bill will it otherwise!

And even the Vigilante chief read as much in the vivid gleam of the eyes fixed so intently upon his own—read the grim truth, and yielded!

"Say et, then!" he grated, hoarsely, viciously, though with lips pallid with craven fear, as his eyes shifted from face to face among his followers. "If the man's guilty, your knife won't save him! Ef he's innocent, he goes free, in course."

"Ye charge him 'ith havin' robbed ther stage?"

"Jes' thet, Whisky Bill."

"Wal, he didn't do et, Curly Slayback! Ther critter who tuck ther money lies dead over yen', stabbed through ther heart from behind. I mean Sandy Parsons!"

A murmur of astonishment went up from the crowd, while a look of incredulity appeared on the face of the Vigilante chief.

"An' hyar's ther stuff ter prove et," pursued Whisky Bill, with his left hand drawing a compact parcel from a capacious pocket inside his coat. "'Money talks,' they say, an' in this case I reckon she does, fer hyar she is, all tied an' sealed, an' not three minutes from the dead man's pocket!"

Now a breathless silence for a moment held the excited throng, while a hundred pairs of eyes eagerly scanned the precious package held aloft in the hand of the vagrant; then, with one accord, the miners broke in yells of delight.

"Prove thet ye got et thar! Prove thet you an' ther Sport ain't in cahoots!" savagely grated Slayback, as soon as the tumult had subsided. "Et looks putty derved suspicious, you turnin' up with ther money jest at this time!"

"Whisky Bill came by ther money jest es he claims, Curly!" sternly declared a tall, blue-eyed young man, pushing close up beside the two. "I war with him when he got et, an' so war Marshal Dan Burgess and Gabe Denbar—ef they'll tell ther truth!"

"Your word goes! Tom Sawyer!" Slayback returned. "An' thar's bin 'most enough said all 'round!"

"Ther Sport don't hang, gents; but he's done with Big Ledge all ther same! Thar's bin some queer things happened this night, an' I ain't quite clear thet this Dauntless Dell, as ther major calls him, is innocent of et all. Leastways, he 'pears ter hev brung us on'y bad luck an' trouble, an' out o' camp he goes, with a taste of what he'll git ef he ever comes back!"

"What say?"

A yell of approval came from the Vigilantes, and before an opposing hand could be lifted, they had closely surrounded their victim.

Warned by the peculiar glitter in the eyes of Slayback that peril threatened Daunt, Whisky Bill had leaped back to take his stand beside the helpless Sport—only to reel and fall under a heavy blow from a bludgeon in the hands of a watchful Vigilante.

In an instant Tom Sawyer had taken possession of the money package, and with the help of a miner, dragged the unconscious vagrant from beneath the trampling feet of the surging crowd.

"Et's a burnin' shame!" slowly observed Sawyer, as he straightened up and gazed thoughtfully toward the Sport. "I don't believe ther man's guilty of anything wuss then makin' a livin' by his wits; leastways, he's clean out of ther murder an' ther stage robbery. But what kin we do? Ef I call up ther boys an' go in ter help him off with a hull hide, some of ther blamed serpents 'll fang him in ther back, fust off!"

"Thet they will," the miner assented. "We'll hev ter keep han's off, I reckon. But I tell you, Tom, et's high time Curly Slayback an' his gang was turned down!"

The superintendent of the Lone Hunter Mine bowed his head in acquiescence.

"Stiddy, critter—dern ye! an' foller yer nose straight ahead!"

"One—two—three! Lay on, Macduff!"

With a shrill, whistling sound, the short, knotted ropes cut through the air and fell across

the naked shoulders of the doomed Sport, each lash raising a red welt on the firm, white flesh.

"One—two—three! One—two—three! More power to your arms, my boys!"

Mockingly came those words from the Vigilante chief, each one emphasized by a vicious stroke of the terrible lash.

Dell Daunt was indeed completely in the power of his merciless tormentors. Naked from the waist up, with his hands securely pinioned before him, and half strangled by the ropes thrown around his neck to hold him in check, he was forced along, step by step, while that storm of blows fell with clock-like regularity and precision.

And that the Sport suffered deeply, was evidenced by a single glance at his knotted forehead, his glaring eyes, or empurpled face. His teeth were hard-set, his hands clinched till the nails buried themselves in the flesh; but not a word, not a moan, passed his tightly-drawn, blood-flecked lips.

And his agony of mind was fully as great as his physical suffering; proud, high-spirited, he keenly felt the indignities put upon him by his relentless foes.

Straight past the smoldering ruins of the hotel and up the winding roadway serving as the principal street of the camp trooped the Vigilantes, hooting, yelling, cursing and shouting, driving their victim step by step, plying their horrible lashes till the blood came—on and on, till Big Ledge lay behind them and the Gopher Lode trail stretched away through the hills before them.

Then, at a word from Slayback, the evil gang halted, and the ropes and pinions were removed from the victim, leaving him weak and trembling, scarcely able to stand.

"That's ther road, Dauntless Dell! You git!" uttered Curly Slayback, viciously. "Jes' make up yer mind ye're done with Big Ledge, fer ef ye ever come back—wal, to-night's a picnic ter what ye'll ketch!"

Not a word spoke the exiled Sport. For perhaps a half minute his glowing eyes remained fixed upon the face of the Vigilante chief, and then he turned and walked slowly away in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

LETTA, THE HERMIT'S DAUGHTER.

"MAY Heaven guard that bold Sport! He is far too brave a man to die by the hand of a lurking assassin!"

The words, uttered in a low, intense tone, came from the lips of a beautiful girl sheltered in a clump of bushes at the edge of a terrace overlooking the Gopher Lode trail at that point where stood the coach with Giddy Norton, the driver, lifeless on the box, slain but a moment before by that dastardly shot from ambush.

For a full minute the girl remained at the edge of the terrace, her shapely hands clasped as if in silent supplication, her dark eyes narrowly watching every move of the aroused Sport as he beat here and there through the undergrowth in his unavailing search for the trail of the murderer; then, with a sigh and a lingering glance at the stage and its ghastly burden, she turned back from the verge, and with quick, restless steps hurried into a winding pass leading deeper into the range.

The girl, it may here be said, was none other than the lady passenger whose mysterious evanishment had so completely baffled Dell Daunt, as narrated in the opening chapter of this story; and that it was her design to baffle and avoid pursuit was evidenced by the painstaking care with which she selected her course, ever choosing the hardest and stoniest surface even at the expense of an occasional considerable detour and much severe exertion.

For nearly an hour she followed the tedious windings of the pass, speeding along with the assurance of one thoroughly familiar with the course, and displaying strength and endurance strangely at variance with her delicately-molded form. Then one of the frowning walls broke away in easy slopes and terraces, and she mounted agilely toward the summit.

Upon the crest of the ridge she paused, and for some minutes busied herself with an attentive survey of her surroundings. The scene was one of rugged grandeur, even sublimity; but it was all old to the girl, and utterly failed to bring so much as a flash or a gleam to her eyes.

"Thank goodness! there is no one visible," she at length exclaimed, with a firm compression of her red lips. "Since that day I was trailed from here by that ruffianly hunter, I've never crossed the ridge without some feeling of misgiving. It is true that papa gave the fellow a terrible drubbing, but that fact only adds to my uneasiness of mind."

"Which same shows yer sense, Letta Hart!"

"Throw up yer han's! Sandy Parsons hol's ther trump keerd at last, an' he's game ter play et!"

Tauntingly, the hoarse voice jarred out upon the breath of silence following the girl's low-spoken words, and above the crest of an adjacent bowlder appeared the head and shoulders

of a man, his outstretched right hand clutching a cocked revolver.

At the first word, the girl turned quickly. Her face paled and her dark eyes dilated with terror as her glance encountered that evil visage peering over the rock. Her arms dropped inertly at her sides, and she reeled blindly as the truth flashed upon her with crushing force.

She was entrapped! Any attempt at flight meant death, as a single glance at that grimly pitiless face at once attested!

"Don't ye try et, my purty 'un!" hoarsely warned the ruffian, rightly reading the first thought to force its way through the dazed brain of the girl. "I mean straight bizness! I'm not ter be cheated o' my revenge, an' ef ye try ter move hand or foot afore I give ye leave, I'll shoot ye same as ef ye war a rabbit or a bird!"

"Now, stan' still! I'm comin' out."

At that moment, had the way been perfectly clear, Letta Hart could not have moved a step. Ever an ugly ruffian, Sandy Parsons now seemed a demon incarnate between his contending emotions of hatred and triumph, and the expression mantling his empurpled face chilled the girl to the heart.

Warily, keeping his eyes on his prey and holding his weapon in readiness to fire, the desperado made his way from the covert and awkwardly lunged across the space intervening, to seize the arm of Letta Hart in his eager clutch.

Not until that moment had he felt quite sure of his victim. An exultant laugh broke from his bearded lips, and he gave the arm within his grasp a sharp wrench as he lowered his head until his hot breath swept the girl's pallid cheek.

"Eb, my purty 'un? Not even a kiss or two ter—"

Aroused no less by the threatened indignity than by the iron grip of those grimy fingers upon her arm, Letta Hart suddenly wrenched herself loose and with clinched hand dealt the desperado a stinging blow in the eye, then turned and ran away, fumbling at a small revolver in the pocket of her dress.

Sandy Parsons, though fairly staggered by that one swift stroke, was quick to recover. Uttering a low growl, he bounded forward in hot pursuit, gaining on the fugitive with every breath.

Across the sharply-defined summit, down a short steep slope, and thence along a narrow terrace overhanging a dangerous precipice, sped the girl, until the hand of the ruffian fell heavily upon her shoulder.

"Cuss ye! stop! Don't—"

A fierce execration filled the hiatus. Again had Letta Hart broken away from that vicious clutch, this time to face resolutely about, leveled revolver in hand.

"Stand!" she cried, sharply, her dark eyes kindling with a warning gleam. "Take one step toward me, you ruffian, and I will shoot you dead!"

That the girl was in deadly earnest could not be doubted; at that moment Sandy Parsons was face to face with death, and he knew it. The fierce light in his eyes gave way to a glare of fear, and he paled to a sickly, yellowish-white. He stood at bay, balked, yet with the rancorous fury of a devil in his heart; stood at bay, watching the girl and anon stealing swift, sidelong glances at his surroundings.

There was little in his environments to reassure him. The long and narrow terrace was absolutely barren of bush or bowlder behind which cover might be sought, while the edge of the precipice was so near that a single false step would hurl him upon the rocks below.

Had Letta Hart's action been calmly and deliberately planned, it could not have stripped the ruffian more completely of advantage. As this fact forced itself upon him, Parsons gave way to the murderous fury which had seized upon him, and quickly leveled his revolver, determined to hazard all on a single shot.

It was a fatal move.

Before he could press the trigger, the weapon in the hand of the girl spoke, and with a wild yell the ruffian staggered back, reeled blindly, then toppled over the edge of the precipice.

High up on the sharply-sloping side of a lofty peak, kneeling with Winchester in hand at the outer edge of a short "bench," intently watching the scene being enacted upon the terrace, hoping and praying that the fates might decree him a single shot at the burly form of Sandy Parsons without risk to the girl—kneeling there, with glittering eyes and stern face, was a tall old man, gaunt, and as gray almost as the rocks themselves.

This man was Hermit Hart, the father of Letta.

Only a moment of that intense anxiety, that forced inaction, then the girl's revolver cracked, and as the old hermit miner noted the result he sprang to his feet with a sharply-drawn breath of relief.

"Letta! Letta!" he shouted, at the top of his old voice. "Letta! Letta! This-a-way, gal!"

But if Letta Hart heard, she gave no answer—

ing sound or sign; indeed, at the very moment Parsons staggered over the verge she sunk inertly upon the narrow terrace, senseless if not lifeless.

"Swooned, or—"

Hermit Hart's thin, gray-bearded lips closed tightly as he choked back the remainder of that terse sentence. Unconscious his daughter might be, but as yet he would not harbor even the thought that her condition could be anything worse. Yet the fear was there, as his next words attested.

"Ef ther devil's hurted her—ef he's putt so much es ther weenty finger o' his dirty paw onto her, I'll skin 'im an' grill 'im by inches ef so be thar's a mite o' life left in his dirty carcass!" he gritted, starting down the spur at a reckless pace, rifle in hand. "Pity I didn't fergit I was human t'other time!"

The thin old lips settled into grim and rigid lines with that last bitter sentence, and a moment more found the mountain-man at the foot of the perilous slope, ready to ascend to the terrace where Letta lay.

Even as his heavily-booted foot pressed the zigzag path leading to that upper height, the temptation was strong upon him to swerve aside and learn the result of his daughter's shot—to supplement it if life remained in the ruffian's body; but his intense anxiety, his love, proved even stronger than his fierce desire for vengeance, and to that simple and natural victory of the affections Sandy Parsons owed the brief lease of life remaining him.

Up—up, with an agility little short of marvelous in one of his seemingly advanced age, clambered Hermit Hart, until the terrace was gained; then straight to his daughter he sped, and sunk upon his knees at her side.

Searchingly his gleaming black eyes scanned the deathly upturned face. No mark of violence was there.

"Thank ther Lord, et's only a faint, after all!" the mountain-man exclaimed, with a long sigh of relief, as he drew a flask from his pocket and poured a few drops of potent liquor between the set, ashy lips of the girl. "Ef don't seem in nater fer ther Harts ter die 'ith theyr boots on, nohow. Now, thar was thet onlucky tumble o' mine—"

The hermit checked himself abruptly. His brows contracted, and his hands trembled so that the flask almost slipped from his nerveless fingers.

"Way will I think o' thet!" he gritted, vehemently, a peculiar light appearing in his dark eyes. "Why will et come back ter me ag'in an' ag'in—thet one black, blank spot thet skeers me so I lose my senses? God! ef I c'd only fergit et, es I fergit *what* et was an' what went afore et! But I cain't—I cain't!"

And almost with the abandon of utter despair, spoke Hermit Hart, swinging his long, thin hands and glaring around like one demented.

A long, fluttering sigh from Letta recalled his wandering senses. Putting the flask to his lips he took a heavy dram of the liquor, then returned to the task on hand.

Little remained to be done, save to reassure the girl as she abruptly started up, half in terror, half in defiance.

"He's gone, Letta, an' et's a good riddance o' a bad 'un," gravely uttered Hermit Hart, laying his hand caressingly upon his daughter's shoulder. "Nee'n't ter worry 'bout et, nuther. A fall over ther rocks jest thar w'd kill a goat; an' ef he war so awkward es ter tumble over a tryin' ter dodge yer bullet, why none's ter blame but hisself. Sarves 'im jest right, too—dang 'im!"

Letta uttered no word in return. At that moment the full horror of the tragedy was before her, and she stood appalled.

"I see'd all thet happened hyar," the hermit continued, gently drawing the girl along the terrace to the path by which he had ascended. "You did me proud, pet—you did all ther Harts thet ever lived proud!" with growing impressiveness. "Ther great, lumberin', hulkin' brute! may ther devil grill him brown!"

"Hush! hush—" "Let be, pet! Et's nary a word amiss. Sech critters deserve all ther hard knocks ye kin give 'em. An' he'd 'a' fared a heap sight wuss ef I c'd 'a' got along a bit sooner—es I jest w'd but fer thet low shark of a Gabe Denbar!"

With that, the mountain-man lapsed into silence. The path leading down from the terrace was at hand, and, burdened as he was with the trembling, shrinking, almost helpless girl, it would require the closest attention and all his energies to accomplish that perilous descent without mishap.

Slowly, surely, step by step the two proceeded, Letta steadily rallying under the exertion demanded, so that ere the narrow level lying between the two ridges was reached she was again the cool, clear-headed girl who had so resolutely faced Sandy Parsons.

"Good enough, pet!" uttered Hermit Hart, with an approving nod, as they paused for a breathing-pell at the foot of the cliff. "Ef you ain't a out-an'-out Hart, they never was one! Jest wait till I take a look 'round hyar at ther critter, an' then we'll mosey on ter ther cabin."

"No, no, father; I'll go with you," Letta re-

turned, promptly rising from the boulder on which she had seated herself.

But the mountain-man shook his head in a vigorous negative, saying:

"Tain't no fit sight fer sech as you, gal. You stay."

Letta obediently returned to the stone.

The old man was not long gone. When he came back there was disappointment plainly visible in every line of his rugged face.

"Only winged," he announced, sententiously.

"Lit in ther bush an' then lit out. Come!"

Silently the two took their way homeward.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT THE HERMIT FOUND.

ABOUT four miles due west from the Gopher Lode trail, and perhaps six miles to the southwest of the camp of Big Ledge, nestling in a secret nook in the range, was a small cabin of rough, unhewn logs.

In the rear of the low building rose a sheltering, overhanging ledge, while at a distance of fifty yards a cunningly-trained, chaparral-like growth served as a screen to the front and ends. A stoutly-built log stable adjoined the cabin on the north, and a vegetable-garden filled all the remaining space. A rill of water, bursting from the ledge, fell noisily into a long wooden trough, furnishing water for man and beast.

It was certainly a snug retreat, secure from prying eyes. Approach from the rear seemed impossible, and there was not a break visible in the smoothly-trimmed inner wall of the chaparral.

Here it was that Hermit Hart and his daughter lived.

Just at the break of day on the morning following the events narrated in the preceding chapter, the door of the cabin was softly opened and the hermit appeared. For a full minute he remained on the threshold, surveying his surroundings as narrowly as the uncertain light would permit, then silently closed the door behind him and crossed the garden to the wall of the chaparral.

Every step, every move, was made with the stealth of an Indian warrior creeping upon a sleeping enemy. At the outer edge of the garden he paused again, and bent his head to listen. A moment thus, then he began to move slowly to and fro along the line of the gloomy growth, peering into its dark recesses with furtively-gleaming eyes.

Not until every foot of the dense hedge had been subjected to the severest scrutiny did he desist. Then a crafty smile crossed his thin old face, and he complacently exclaimed:

"Crazy Hart has been too sharp fer ther human hawks. They've failed ter find his dove-cote!"

Every morning at that hour, from the day his daughter had joined him in his mountain solitude, Hermit Hart had proceeded in just this way, and had invariably ended his reconnaissance with the words quoted.

After a moment's chuckling the old mountain-man recrossed the garden and entered the stable, from which he shortly emerged leading a stout-limbed gray horse, which he carefully groomed, watered and fed.

That done, he returned to the cabin, where he found Letta busy with preparations for breakfast.

"Goin' ter leave ye alone ter-day, pet," he announced, seating himself in a corner of the neat little room and beginning a careful examination of his weapons. "Goin' over ter Big Ledge. Sold Gabe Denbar, ther lawyer sharp over thar, thet played-out hole in ther hillside down yan yistiddy, fer five thousand dollars. Heap o' money he'll make out of thet deal! Mighty smart lawyer, him!"

Letta dropped her work and turned a pained and startled face to her father.

"Father! you should not have done that!" she exclaimed, with the tone of one reproving a willful child. "Mr. Denbar certainly can know very little about mines or mining, and it is very wrong in you to take advantage of him. You must return him his money. Why, the 'mine' is utterly worthless!"

But the old mountain-man doggedly shook his head.

"Gabe's a sharp, an' I'll allers skin sech critters ef I kin," he retorted. "Five thousand is a pile o' money, too—more'n any o' ther Harts ever hed, es I 'members of. No, no, pet! I'm ter git ther money ter-day, an' I'll keep et, too. With et an' what I've got, we kin git out o' ther bills an' hunt a safer place fer you; 'tain't no place fer you hyar, an' ther sooner we git ther better!"

The look on her father's firm old face told Letta that any further remonstrance would be worse than useless, and she silently returned to her work.

The hermit ate very sparingly of the tempting viands placed before him that morning, and not till he rose to quit the table did he speak.

"I want ye ter be mighty keerful ter-day, pet," he remarked, laying his hand gently on Letta's shoulder and looking down at her with a troubled gleam in his dark eyes. "'Pears es ef I ain't jest right in ther head this mornin'—"

kind o' clouded an' hazy like, an' thet black spot keeps comin' back. Mebbe it's a warnin', I don't know. Anyway, you be keerful, an' ef I don't git back, you know whar ther money is an' what ter do."

And bending his head, he pressed a kiss on his daughter's brow, caught up his rifle, and turned to leave the cabin.

Letta followed him to the door and again attempted to dissuade him from going; but he was unyielding.

"Cain't lose sech a chance, pet," he protested, backing out of the cabin and on toward the stable. "Et's a heap o' money fer a Hart—a heap, a heap! Take good keer o' yerself, an' be a good girl, an' I'll be back soon."

Putting saddle and bridle upon the horse, he waved a farewell to the girl, then led the animal around the end of the stable and disappeared within a narrow fissure in the ledge.

Straight into the depths of the hill this fissure seemed to lead, but a hundred feet from the entrance it turned abruptly to the northward, and here Hermit Hart encountered the first obstacle in his way—a wall of solid rock.

Bending his head, the old mountain-man listened intently a moment, then produced a rudely-fashioned iron key from an adjacent niche and thrust it into a crevice in the rocky wall. A sharp wrench, a grating, rasping sound, and the huge stone slowly moved aside, disclosing the remainder of the fissure, with a faint, gray light in the distance.

When Hermit Hart had led his horse through this subterranean gateway, he turned and pried the ponderous block back into place by means of a powerful lever hidden in the wall, carefully locked it and secreted the key, then mounted and rode slowly toward the distant light.

As he neared the end of the passage, the sound of running water became distinctly audible, and a moment later the hermit rode out from an overhanging bank into the middle of a foaming mountain stream.

And so sinuous was this brawling, shallow current that one might follow its course for miles with never more than a hundred yards of it visible above or below him. Its banks were lofty and rugged, in many places rising in sheer precipices of great height, while at almost every turn were to be seen fissures similar in appearance to that from which Hermit Hart had just emerged.

Down-stream the mountain-man laid his course, leaving his horse to pick its way through the winding current, while he kept a watchful eye upon his surroundings. For nearly an hour he rode on thus, slowly, cautiously, until, finally, at a long break in the northern bank he quitted the stream.

And here again was his cunning evinced, for at the point he left the water a wide, barren waste so hard and stony that the iron-shod hoofs of his horse would leave not the faintest impress of his course.

Straight across this dreary level he took his way, heading for a small heavily-wooded eminence overlooking the Gopher Lode trail. In the shelter of the densest of the timber he halted, dismounted and tethered his horse, then crept back to a point where he could survey the open just traversed.

For nearly half hour he lay patiently waiting and watching, then rose with that crafty smile again stealing over his face.

"Ther hawks hev given et up!" he muttered. "Ther trail o' Hermit Hart is buried too deep fer ther sharpest beak in the hills. His dove is safe!"

Carefully skirting the eminence, the mountain-man next stationed himself for a brief survey of the Gopher Lode trail.

Here, as on the waste, there was nothing to arouse his suspicions, and he turned back to secure his horse.

A dozen paces, then he abruptly halted, with his hands upon the weapons in his belt.

Before him, lying face downward, in the shadow of a clump of bushes, was the body of a man—a trim, well-built fellow, whose naked back and shoulders were crossed and recrossed with angry welts and wales, with here and there a livid gash.

So much the hermit discovered at a glance. With two or three quick strides he approached the body and gently turned it to see if life was extinct.

The face thus brought to the gaze of Hermit Hart seemed to chill his very soul. Uttering a cry of terror, he sprang back and sunk in a cowering, shivering heap, pressing his hands to his eyes to shut out that grisly sight.

"God! it is that bitter, black spot again, an' more terrible than ever!" he groaned, with chattering teeth. "Why should that face fetch it back? Why—why—why? It is not the face I dreamed of again an' again, an' it is not the face I seek."

This last thought rallied the courage of the hermit a trifle, and he stole a fleeting glance at the grim white visage gleaming there in the shadow of the bushes.

It was not a bad face, surely, nor repulsive, barring its blood-flecked deathliness. And with that one stolen look, Hermit Hart routed his weakness.

"He's some poor devil given ther lash by ther toughs o' Big Ledge," he muttered, rising and passing his hand over his brow in a troubled way. "Pears es ef some o' ther critters down ther war meamer'n ther Old Nick hisself!"

Again approaching the body, the hermit knelt and resumed his task.

"Ther critter's not dead, shore enough," he exclaimed, after a moment. "He's hed a mighty tight squeak, though, an' ef he ain't fixed up a bit he'll go yit. Now, what's ter be done?"

With Hermit Hart, there could be but one answer to that question. Despite his eccentricity and his knavish cunning, the old man was of a kindly nature, and the pitiable condition of the helpless stranger appealed strongly to his sympathies.

As in Letta's case a few hours before, out came the ready flask, lately replenished, and a few drops of the powerful liquor was sent gurgling through the livid lips of the sadly-battered man, while another portion was applied to his temples and nostrils, accompanied with a vigorous rubbing and chafing from the hermit's harsh palms.

But the work of resuscitation proved slow, as several minutes elapsed ere this vigorous treatment evoked the first sign of returning animation. Alarmed at the tardiness of his patient recovering, Hermit Hart at length turned him on his face and with deft touch applied the liquor to the ugly wounds marring the firm white flesh of back and shoulders.

The effect was electrical.

Uttering a cry, the man sprang half erect and confronted the hermit with blazing eyes.

"Back! back! you devils!" he gritted, striking savagely, right and left. "Let me die in peace!"

It was but a fleeting paroxysm, however, for with that one exertion his strength slipped away and he sunk back, weak, moaning and helpless.

"Easy now," cautioned the hermit in a quieting tone, as he reapproached, flask in hand. "Here—take another drink o' this; it'll brace you up."

The voice of the old mountain-man seemed to fall upon the ears of the wounded Sport with a familiar ring. Lifting his head slightly, he fixed his keen blue eyes in a piercing stare upon the kindly yet inscrutable face bending over him.

"Like, yet very unlike," he muttered, then motioned to place the flask to his parched lips.

"Now, rest easy a bit, an' you'll gam strength," advised Hermit Hart, drawing back and returning the flask to his pocket.

The Sport turned upon his side, and wearily closed his eyes. The very presence of the old mountain-man seemed to exert over him a soothing influence, and in a few minutes he fell into a light sleep.

Patiently the hermit awaited, walking to and fro with a stealthy, cat-like tread, and anon stealing long, furtive glances at the face of the sleeping man. Where had he seen that clear-cut, resolute face before? Somewhere, surely, but a long time ago. It was a friendly face, too—that much the dazed brain of the old man could recall—that much, then the "black spot" would come over his inner vision, embellished now with the visage of his nightly dreams.

To and fro, to and fro, forgetful of his errand, Hermit Hart slowly glided, drawing his hand across his brow as if to brush aside that filmy cloud hanging between his past and his present.

"I'll find that face!" he savagely vowed, suddenly pausing with clinched hands and burning eyes. "I'll find that face, some day, an' tear ther truth from its devilish, cruel lips! It can't torment me always, an' always give me ther slip! No, no! Ther Harts are a cunning race, an' Crazy Hart, ther hermit, are the cunningest Hart that ever lived! Look out, you devil, fer when I meet you I shall kill you!"

Fortunately, the Sport at that moment awoke and sat up.

"Hallo! hallo!" he exclaimed, in a voice indicative of returning strength. "Are you ill, my friend?"

"Jest a-thinkin'—that's all," replied the mountain-man, craftily changing his expression with that cunning smile.

"And your thoughts were unpleasant ones," the Sport asserted, gazing keenly at Hart and speaking with easy assurance. "Say, do you know you remind me very strikingly of an old friend of mine—a gold-hunter called Old Missouri!"

Old Hart fell back as if confronted by a grinning apparition.

"Old Missouri!" he gasped, averting his face and nervously working his long, sinewy hands. "Old Missouri! whar hev I heered that name? Oh, yes! I member now! I knew him before an' after."

"Before and after"—what?"

"Ther black spot!"

"The black spot. What was that?"

"Thet's my business!" the mountain-man returned, with a pitiable assumption of dignity. "An' lookee hyar, strownger, ye're gittin' a derned sight too quisitious—mind thet! I'm willin' ter do a critter in your fix a sarvice when

I kin, but don't you ask too many questions. Understand?"

"I beg your pardon. I really meant no offense, but you reminded me so strongly of my old friend that the question slipped out before I knew it."

The Sport spoke lightly but his eyes were fixed on the face of the old man with a keen, absorbing interest.

The hermit shifted about uneasily.

"I've bin a-waitin' ter dress yer back afore I putt on," he remarked, in a slow, hesitating tone unusual with him. "While I do et, I don't mind tellin' ye what I know of Old Missouri, though et's precious little, es I'm gettin' old an' forgetful. Jest wait a minute till I gits a lotion an' some lint I always kerries in my saddle-bags."

The Sport nodded, and narrowly watched the retreat of the hermit.

"Strangel! strangel!" he muttered, in an undertone. "Like, and yet so unlike!"

Hart was not gone long. When he returned he was followed by his horse.

"I ain't much time ter spare," he observed, with a glance at the sun, now nearing the noon-day time. "I'll fix ye so them hurts'll ease up a bit, an' then they'll heal all right."

"Now, fer what I know."

"My name's Hart—'Hermit Hart' they call me. I knowed Old Missouri a good many years. The last time I saw him, he was dead, an' had bin dead a long time. He was layin' at ther foot o' a cliff, an' alongside him was an oilskin packet containin' three or four letters, which same I kerried ter ther nearest station an' putt in ther post. An' thet is all."

"Can you remember the address on any of those letters?"

"No, I can't. 'Twas a long time ago—three or four years."

"And the body—you buried it?"

"I—I can't remember," and pausing in his work the hermit passed his hand across his brow.

"This cliff you speak of—is it far from here?" pursued the detective.

"Three or four miles, mebbe."

"Could you take me there?"

"No, no! not now!" cried the hermit, in a tone of protest.

"On your return from your errand, then?"

"No, no! not then! Some day—et may be a long time—mebbe I will. Don't ask questions!"

The agitated manner of the mountain-man warned the Sport to give up his questioning for a time, and with great reluctance he ceased.

Hart hurriedly completed his task. The Sport, learning that the hermit was going to Big Ledge, cautioned him to keep silent as to their meeting, and commissioned him to purchase a supply of weapons, clothing and provisions.

After a few words appointing a place of meeting on his return, Hermit Hart mounted and rode away.

Left to himself the Sport crept deeper into the bushes, and, in spite of his painfully lacerated shoulders, soon sunk into a refreshing sleep.

The sun was low in the Eastern sky when he awoke, and to his intense surprise he was no longer alone.

A horse and rider had approached the knoll, and the rider was none other than Captain Kate, the Lady Bandit!

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN KATE'S RETREAT.

"HALLO! hallo! can it really be you?" the Sport cried, with the air of one most agreeably surprised, and he sprung to his feet and shook hands with the mysterious woman. "Do you know, the very sight of you does me good! I have been extremely uneasy lest you had fallen into the clutches of those scoundrels over at the camp."

"Oh, no! no such ill-luck as that!" responded the woman, in a pleased tone, as she warmly returned the pressure of his hand. "I accomplished my errand with perfect ease."

"But you—you seem to have been less fortunate!"

"More fortunate than the devils who have made me their sworn foe!" the Sport returned, calmly, though a wicked glitter appeared in his bright blue eyes. "As you see, I have been through their hands, and that fact must stand as an excuse for my present deplorable appearance."

The dusky orbs of the woman shone with sympathy through the folds of her heavy veil.

"Say no more about it," she exclaimed, quickly. "I saw Darrit this morning and he told me all I need know. He attempted to follow you last night, but lost you in the darkness, and since sunrise we have both been searching for you."

"He is near, then?"

"He is within sound of this whistle. I will call him."

Captain Kate drew a small silver-plated whistle from her pocket, placed it to her lips and blew a shrill blast.

In a few minutes, the short, bulky figure of

Bolly Darrit, or Whisky Bill, as he was known in the camp of the Big Ledge, appeared below in the trail. Catching sight of the two figures on the knoll, he clambered up at a pace which set his ruddy face aglow.

On reaching the crest, he paused a moment and drew long breath.

"An' so we three meet ag'in!" he unctuously exclaimed, advancing and taking the exile by the hand. "Sport—noble suzerain, I am yourn, yourn, yourn! Command, an' humbly I obey! Make known—"

"Tush! Darrit! Drop the clown and come to business," interrupted the Lady Bandit, with a spice of impatience in her subdued voice. "Mr Daunt is fully acquainted with your real character, and, in his present plight, I dare say he is hardly in the mood for jesting."

"As you will, madam," the mountain detective returned, turning as he dropped the Sport's hand and inclining himself profoundly. "A little buffoonery will do our friend no hurt, but—business is the word, after all!"

"I had intended to suggest that we seek cover, and I now do so. It has come to my knowledge within the past twenty minutes that two armed parties have quitted big Ledge in quest of Captain Kate, with instructions to take her dead or alive."

"That is a pleasing outlook, truly!" the Lady Bandit exclaimed, with a grim compression of her lips. "Now, what has spurred the honest denizens of the camp to this extraordinary move?"

"The honest denizens of the camp have nothing to do with it. Methinks the evil genius back of it is none other than our friend, the major, who has doubtless discovered the trick played upon him at the Cherry House last night in the matter of the envelope supposed to contain the articles of agreement between himself and the gentleman here, Mr. Daunt. Failing to find that coveted document in possession of Mr. Daunt when searched, he had his choice of two conclusions: that it had been destroyed in the Cherry House fire, or had fallen into the hands of Kate Cherry and been carried away. He is firmly of the opinion that you and Kate Cherry are one; ergo the pursuit."

"I believe you have hit upon the correct solution," the Sport exclaimed. "Certain it is that the major must have that paper, or at least every assurance that it has been destroyed, and I know him well enough to feel positive he will scruple at nothing to obtain it or evidence of its destruction. In his false position it would be an extremely awkward thing to have turn up."

"It would indeed," affirmed the Lady Bandit. "But if he expects to find it through capturing me, he is making a great mistake. The document is in a safe place."

"That is all very well, but we had better be moving out of this," the detective urged, bending a sharp glance on the trail below. "One or the other of these scouting parties may appear any moment, and they could make it very unpleasant for us, to say the least."

"Yes, we had better go," agreed the Lady Bandit. "In finding Mr. Daunt, we have accomplished our errand, and the sooner we seek the shelter of my secret retreat the better we shall fare."

Then the Sport spoke:

"I am sorry that I cannot go with you," he said. "I sent to Big Ledge for supplies by Hermit Hart, and am to meet him at a point a little ways down the trail on his return."

"That promise should not keep you here," the detective quickly averred, a peculiar look crossing his face. "You must remember that it was agreed last night that he should be arrested on his appearance in camp to-day, on the charge of murdering Giddy Norton, as Bridge Gerry. In all likelihood, the hermit will never return."

Daunt started, and looked distressed.

"True!" he exclaimed. "That matter had slipped my mind entirely. I should have remembered it and warned the hermit."

"You may ease your mind on that score, my friend," returned Darrit. "I saw Hart, and warned him of his danger, but he hooted the idea and pushed on toward the camp."

"Come, now; let us get away from here." At that juncture the baying of dogs at no great distance gave notice that there was no further time to be lost, and the trio at once quitted the knoll, the Lady Bandit leading the way afoot, walking beside her horse.

Straight across that barren, stony waste to the point at which Hermit Hart had left the stream, hurried the party.

"I am sorry, gentlemen, but you will have to wade almost a mile," Captain Kate announced, as she forced her horse into the edge of the stream and settled herself in the saddle. "Had I foreseen your returning with me, I should have had a boat at hand for you."

"It's little odds to us, just now, madam, one way or the other," the detective declared. "The main thing is to dodge these confounded dogs. They have reached the knoll, back there, and I'm precious glad the water's at hand to break their scents."

The trio started up-stream. For nearly a mile they proceeded in unbroken silence, with an occasional backward glance; then they quitted

the main stream and entered a narrow branch coming down from the north through a gloomy canyon scarcely a dozen feet in width.

"We are nearing my retreat now," the Lady Bandit remarked, as the roar of steadily falling water greeted the ears of the party. "Just beyond that angle in the wall yonder is the lower fall of a series of cascades, and the descending water completely screens the entrance to my den. Follow me closely, and in a moment more we shall be safe."

Even as the mysterious woman ceased speaking, a magnificent scene burst upon the gaze of the two men. At the same instant, however, the heavy report of a rifle reverberated through the narrow confines of the lower gorge, warning them that a moment's delay might prove fatal, and with quickened steps they plunged straight through the veil of falling water.

"Easy now!" warned the woman, as the trio halted in the mouth of the gloomy cavern back of the fall. "That rifle-shot may or may not have come from a party following us up the stream. To be safe, we must not leave the fall unguarded. Remain here, the two of you, until I return."

The Lady Bandit awaited no reply, but at once disappeared with her horse, crossing the moist, sandy floor of the cavern, as silently as a shadow.

Several minutes passed, and nothing occurred to alarm the exile or his detective friend. The gloom rapidly deepened into darkness, and both knew that night was at hand.

Then, suddenly, and so silently that neither man detected her approach, Captain Kate returned, accompanied by a slight, shadowy form.

"Come—follow me," the woman exclaimed, in a suppressed tone, as she laid a hand on the arm of each of the waiting men. "We are safe now, for I have fetched a faithful friend who will guard against surprise or intrusion."

Uttering not a word, Darrit and the exiled Sport followed the Lady Bandit back from the waterfall, and upward through a narrow, winding corridor into a lofty, rock-walled chamber. Here, a huge fire crackled and glowed on the white, dry sand, giving light and warmth and robbing the place of its natural dreariness.

"This is my house," the Lady Bandit announced, not without a trace of bitterness in her voice. "Here I have found a safe retreat from my enemies, and here you are welcome to remain so long as danger threatens."

The Sport warmly expressed his thanks, and then the trio settled themselves close to the fire to dry their dripping garments and form a plan to meet the perils pressing upon them.

Nearly an hour passed, and the discussion was at an end, when a cloaked and cowed figure entered the chamber from one of the numerous branching passages, deposited a bountiful supper upon a flat-topped boulder, and silently withdrew.

"Eat, gentlemen—eat, drink and be merry," Captain Kate exclaimed, rising abruptly. "And pray excuse me. My attendants have signaled that I am wanted at some one of the cavern's numerous outlets, and I must go."

The men nodded and silently approached the table of stone, while the woman disappeared in the nearest of the fissures.

Neither Daunt nor the detective was in a mood for speech; in utter silence they made a hasty though substantial meal, after which they resumed their positions at the fire and patiently waited.

The lady Bandit was not long absent. When she returned, her agitation was so extreme that neither man could help noticing it, although the ever-present veil completely concealed the play of his features.

"You must leave here at once!" she exclaimed, pausing before them and pressing her hands sharply together. "The existence of this cavern is no longer a secret, and our enemies are beating the brush in every direction, save one. You must go, ere that last outlet is hedged in."

"And leave you?—Never!" ejaculated Daunt, impulsively.

"Have no fear for me. If you remain,

you but cumber my movements; alone, they can never find me."

"Captain Kate speaks the truth," Darrit earnestly declared, turning to the Sport. "At hide and seek, she can outwit the shrewdest fox in the hills. Come—we must not mar her chances."

"Yes—yes! go!" urged the woman, gliding restlessly to and fro. "I do not forget the compact between us, and any time I need you, night or day, you shall know it. Should you have need of me, put this ring upon your finger and wear it, and I shall not be long in appearing."

The Lady Bandit ceased. Drawing the bauble from her finger she thrust it into the hand of the Sport, then hurriedly led the way from the chamber.

A brisk walk of perhaps three minutes through a tortuous corridor brought the trio to an outlet screened by dense, tangled undergrowth. A moment of waiting and listening—a brief, low-voiced interchange of words, then the two men stepped forth.

As motionless as a statue stood Captain Kate, until the last low sound of their retreat had died away. Then a long breath of relief parted her lips.

"Safe!" she muttered. "Safe, and another step toward vengeance taken, for, with that bold Sport for my ally I cannot fail!"

Slowly, moodily, she returned to the central chamber, and there seated herself on a rude stool, to gaze dreamingly into the smoldering embers of the fire.

Seated thus, deep in thought, the time slipped by unnoticed until the crunching of a heavy foot on the sand recalled her wandering senses. A swift upward glance, and the woman sprung to her feet, then sunk back, white and helpless.

And well might terror and despair overwhelm her.

Not three paces distant, his bright gray eyes gleaming like living coals, stood the white-clad Titan of Big Ledge, Dandy Jim Crocker!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE HERMIT'S HOME INVADED.

"BUT is ther way clear? Ain't thar jest a chauce thet ther gal ain't all alone? Hermit Hart's cunnin'—cain't git back o' thet fact, Reddy Flack; an' et ain't in nater fer a ole daddy ter leave sech a wee bit o' sweetness es Letta Hart alone an' unpertected. Mebbe we're edgin' 'long toward a trap!"

"Trap—narthin', Ute Jack!" retorted the rough addressed as Reddy Flack, with a deal of subdued explosiveness. "Seems ter me, Ute, 's ef ye'd flinch et yer own shadder. Didn't we see the ole man go? Didn't we see 'im levant through the hole in the rock? Don't we know he'll never come back no more? Don't tempt Providence by doubtin' ther boss's say so—don't!"

"Oh, I ain't flinchin', an' I ain't doubtin'," Ute Jack protested. "But I allers feels safer ef I'm keerful—thet's my game—keerful an' sart'in. Ef ye're ready, say ther word an' we'll purceed ter pay Miss Letta a visit."

"Ready is et!—an' me a-proddin' ye ther last hour ter move on!" with a smothered oath. "Come!"

The two desperadoes quitted the covert in which they had been lurking, and with rapid strides approached the ledge-like growth screening the hermit's cabin.

"Now, Reddy Flack, do be keerful," cautioned Ute Jack, with an ominous shake of his head. "Cain't help et, but et strikes me we're hittin' ther biggest kind ov a trap. I hain't felt jest right sence ther hermit come peepin' throo ther ledge with eyes lookin' like two coals of fire, early this mornin'. Seemed ter hoodoo—"

"Stuff!" growled Flack. "Don't ye s'pose we'd heerd from him ef he'd scented our game or caught onto ther leetle racket we worked last night? Shet, now, an' foller me."

Then, as the ruffian laid hold of the outer bushes, a startling fact came to light.

A narrow pathway had been *saved* straight through the seemingly impenetrable jungle.

To cover this secret task of the long night hours, the stout bushes had been left standing, supported by the interlacing twigs and branches overhead.

So Hermit Hart, with all his shrewdness and cunning, had been fairly outwitted.

Pulling and thrashing the severed bushes aside, the two desperadoes made their way to the open space surrounding the cabin.

"Ther door's open—now forward!" uttered Reddy Flack, crisply.

Their approach was undetected.

Letta Hart, wholly unsuspecting of any unusual danger, was busy within the cabin, and her first intimation of the presence of the desperadoes was the hail:

"Hallo, little 'un!—hallo, thar!"

It was Reddy Flack who uttered the words. He stood in the doorway, his hands upon his pistol-butts, his foxy face aglow, his ferrety little black eyes agleam with triumph.

Ute Jack was just behind him.

Letta started, then quickly confronted the intruders. Her cheeks paled, and a look of alarm flashed from her dark eyes.

A single glance had been all-sufficient to determine the true character of the smiling "visitors."

"They are ruffians—desperadoes of the meanest stamp, and they mean mischief!" the girl could not help thinking.

"Don't—be—be skeered of us, little one—Miss Letta," half-stammered, half-chuckled Flack, for the moment abashed by the pure loveliness of the hermit's daughter. "Don't mean ye no harm, we don't. Jest goin' by, an' thort we'd drop in an' see ef we c'd git a bite ter eat, an' make a sorter friendly visit. See?"

And the ruffian 'coolly advanced and plumped himself down into the nearest chair.

Awkwardly enough, Ute Jack followed his example.

Letta silently eyed them for a full minute, just a trace of anger and disgust visible in her mobile face. Then:

"Very well, men. You shall have your breakfast, and welcome. No man goes hungry from here after he once enters."

Her full, clear voice betrayed no alarm.

"Thank ye, little 'un," Reddy Flack returned, with a grim little laugh. "'Tain't many es hes found ye, I reckon, an' 'tain't allers we're in sech blessed luck! My eyes, no! Now—Wait, thar!—let me hev thet 'ar bucket, little 'un! We're a couple o' rough cusses, we is, but we c'dn't—we jest c'dn't think o' lettin' sech a little tech o' human sweetness tote water fer us; hey, Jack?"

"Nary time!" solemnly asseverated Ute Jack, quick to detect the other's meaning.

"Deed, no!"

"Jack an' me hev hed all-fired good bringin'-up, fer all our rough ways now," smilingly continued Flack, taking the iron water-bucket from Letta's reluctant hand. "Jest wait—I'll be back in a jiffy."

Too good a general to betray her discomfiture, Letta quietly assented, and set about preparing food for the two roughs.

Ute Jack furtively eyed her every move until Flack re-entered the cabin. Then the two roughs conversed in a rambling way until breakfast was announced.

The meal was disposed of in almost unbroken silence.

"Now, little 'un," said Reddy Flack, with a complacent grin, as he at length drew back from the table, "sence ther wants o' my inner man seems satisfied, I'm ready ter talk business, fer business is really what brung us hyar!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Letta, just a trifle acridly, despite her effort to appear unconcerned.

"Yas, business," calmly pursued Flack. "We're deputy-sheriffs, Jack an' me is, an' we've got warrants fer ther arrest o' Hermit Hart an' his darter, which same is you!"

"A warrant—for me!" gasped the girl.

"Edzactly," affirmed the rough, pitilessly.

"But—what have I done?"

"A heap, mebbe; 'tany rate, the warrant charges ye 'ith bein' Captain Kate, ther Lady Bandit, an' 'ith havin' robbed ther Big Ledge stage yistiddy."

"Captain Kate!—the idea!" and the girl's lips curled scornfully. "You know—"

"Now, don't!" interrupted Flack, raising his hand warningly. "This ain't no court o' justice, an' we don't want ter hear a word. Jest git yer traps tergether an' make ready ter go with us."

"But my father—can you not wait until he returns?"

"Nary wait, fer he never'll come back. He went ter Big Ledge this mornin', an' he's wanted thar fer killin' Giddy Norton yistiddy."

"An' now, critter, make haste an' min' thet ye don't tempt any funny business on us, fer we're bound ter take ye, an'—we'd hate ter use ye rough!"

For a moment Letta seemed on the point of rebelling. Her eyes flashed irefully and her hand crept toward her bosom; but the devilish look on Reddy Flack's face warned her that any attempt at resistance would be most disastrous, and with a weary sigh she turned to her enforced task.

It required but a few minutes to pack a small hand-bag, but during that brief time her brain worked with wondrous rapidity.

"Your warrant—I must see it!" she suddenly exclaimed, sternly confronting the two miscreants.

Again Reddy Flack uttered a grim little laugh.

"Ye do, eh?" he sneered. "Wal, ye're goin' ter be disappointin', 'case we've got no warrant. Fact is, we're not even deputy sheriffs. But we want *you*, my lady-bird, an' with us 'might makes right.' See?"

Letta Hart's mobile features changed in a manner as mysterious as pronounced. The subdued, fearful look gave place to an expression of righteous anger and indignation. Her sachel fell unheeded to the floor, and again her hand darted swiftly toward the weapon concealed in her bosom.

But Reddy Flack and Ute Jack were too old in villainy to be caught off their guard.

Forward they sprung, with the liveness and suppleness of wild beasts, and in a twinkling, almost, the hermit's daughter was helpless in their relentless grasp.

"Dern ye, let up!" growled Flack, shaking her savagely, as his sinewy fingers closed roughly on her shoulder. "We'll take ye, dead or alive, an' we'd jest a little rather it'd be dead!"

"Help! help! Oh, mercy of heaven, help!"

"Shut up! Shut, an' stay—"

The sentence was not finished. A quick, light step at the rear door of the cabin had startled the keen-eared desperado, and with drawn revolver he whirled about just in time to catch a terrific blow squarely between the eyes.

He fell to the floor like a stricken ox.

The duller-witted Ute Jack sprung back with a yell of alarm.

"Stiddy! stiddy, ye ungainly hound!" enunciated a low, intense voice. "Ye've insulted ther leetle lady, an' by ther sword o' General Jackson! ye must answer fer et ter Long Pete Jenkins!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AGAINST ODDS.

INTENSELY dramatic was that scene in the home of the Hermit Miner.

Stretched out on the floor, senseless as a log, lay Reddy Flack, his face white and ghastly, with the blood oozing from his nose, mouth and ears. The blow of a trip-hammer could scarcely have been more damaging than that vengeful stroke of the giant ranger's fist.

Near the fallen desperado, overcome for the moment by that sudden transition from fear to hope, crouched fair Letta Hart, with her face buried in her hands as if to shut out the horrors gathered about her.

Ute Jack stood as motionless as a statue. The dull-witted dastard was overwhelmed with consternation. He longed to flee, but his legs stubbornly refused to do his will.

Of the four occupants of the cabin, the last comer alone seemed to retain full possession of his faculties. There was a look in his eyes not good to see, and he towered above the cringing outlaw like an avenging Nemesis.

For a full half-minute he stood thus, glaring with blazing eyes at the culprit before him, then with two swift, impetuous strides crossed the intervening space.

Ute Jack drew back with a menacing growl; but he proved helpless as an infant in the sinewy hands of the giant, and in another minute was disarmed.

"Go!" uttered the ranger, his long index finger pointing to the door.

Just the one word, but that one in a tone to strike a chill of terror to the cowardly soul of Ute Jack. Uttering a doleful howl, he turned and fled from the cabin, helped onward in his flight by a series of vigorous "lifts" from Jenkins's foot.

Without so much as a second glance at the retreating wretch, the ranger crossed the room, and closed and fastened the rear door. Then taking Reddy Flack in his arms, he carried him out of the cabin and laid him in the shadow of the Ledge.

A brief examination convinced Jenkins that the ruffian would remain unconscious a number of hours, with, indeed, a probability of his never awakening.

"Sech varmints are tricky, so I'll draw his teeth, anyway," the old ranger muttered, and, disarming Flack, he returned to the cabin.

Letta Hart met him at the door, still nervous and agitated, it is true, but rapidly recovering from her terror.

"You came in good time, and I thank you," she said, simply, extending her hand, with a look of trust in her dark eyes. "My father is away from home, this morning, and your coming is all that saved me from those evil wretches."

"Then I'm mighty glad I came," Long Pete returned, gently patting the slim brown hand he held. "I was cuttin' through ther hills ter strike ther Big Ledge trail over yen', when I heer'd ye cry out, so I jest left Jezzy ter take keer o' herself an' slipped in by a path fresh cut through ther thicket."

A faint yell, following by a confused jargon of voices at that moment warned the ranger and the girl to defer any further explanation.

"Those cusses hev friends near," Jenkins exclaimed. "Keep in the cabin, gal, till I kin see who an' what they are. I'll not be long gone."

"Wait!" urged Letta, laying a restraining hand on the giant's arm. "If they are coming in any force, we would better abandon the cabin and retreat to the cavern yonder, for then we can escape through a secret outlet if hard pushed."

Pausing only long enough to nod a hasty assent, Jenkins hurried across the little inclosure and entered the path leading through the thicket.

A single glance through the narrow opening was all-sufficient to determine his course of action.

Not only was Ute Jack returning, but with him were an even half-dozen as desperate-looking ruffians as ever disgraced a camp.

One burly scoundrel had appropriated the ranger's mare, and had fallen considerably behind the others to secure his prize.

"I on'y hope ther cuss 'll try ter ride her!" chuckled Jenkins, grimly, as he noted the hands into which the faithful animal had fallen. "It's a mighty queer thing about Jezzy, but she do seem ter hate a darned boss-thief!"

"Now, I'll jest make ther gang show theyr hand," and in a stern voice the ranger called out:

"Halt, thar, gentle critters!—halt, or eat cold lead!"

The effect of the words was electrical, and naught but the cunning of the giant saved him from serious wounds, if not death itself, for Ute Jack and his allies instantly poured a volley of bullets through that narrow pathway, then broke right and left in quest of cover.

Even the ruffian in possession of the mare seemed to forget his yearning for strange horse-flesh and disappeared in a clump of bushes.

In anticipation of that volley, Long Pete had thrown himself flat upon his face, and as the leaden hail hurtled over him he hastily quitted the thicket and retraced his steps to the cabin.

Letta, having secured her weapons and locked the door, was anxiously awaiting him.

"We'd better make for the cave," Jenkins averred, keeping a wary eye on the point at which the desperadoes must present themselves. "Thar's seven o' ther critters, an' they mean mischief."

Silently, Letta led the way to the fissure through which Hermit Hart had taken his departure two or three hours earlier.

Twenty paces down the gloomy corridor

and just behind a jutting angle in one of the walls, was a deep recess, commanding a full view of the entrance with but slight exposure, and here the two took their stand.

Slowly the minutes passed, without a sound to break the fatal silence.

"Them cusses are plottin' deviltry," uttered Jenkins, at last. "They know we hev come in hyar, an' they likewise know et 'ud be pesky bad business ter try ter foller us. They won't bother us before night, an' so I moves we go on ter ther outlet."

"And from there straight to the camp of Big Ledge, for I fear that my father is in trouble there," added Letta, and she hurriedly explained the nature of the hermit's errand, together with the possibility of his having been led into a trap.

The major listened attentively, then gravely nodded his head saying:

"Et do look bad fer him, Miss Letta, an' I rather guesses ye've called ther turn; howsomever, I've got some friends down thar, an' ef they hain't in trouble, too, we'd orter be able ter pull ther old man out. Jest ye lead ther way out o' this pesky hole, an' we'll break straight fer ther camp."

Quickly, Letta led the way down the passage, and with a key taken from the pocket unlocked the huge gate, of stone, then telling Jenkins how to close and relock it, the girl disappeared within a narrow fissure, from which she shortly emerged bearing a bulky package wrapped in oil-skin.

"It is father's money," she explained, frankly as she yielded the package to Jenkins.

Then the two hurried on to the outlet, now just visible in the distance.

Arrived at the water's edge, Letta produced a light boat from a sheltered nook hard by, and embarking, the two pushed boldly out from beneath the shelving bank.

Turning down-stream, Long Pete urged the light craft forward with powerful strokes, and within a half-hour had passed the crossing of the Big Ledge trail.

A couple of hundred yards below the trail, the ranger pointed the boat's prow shoreward, saying:

"We'll land hyar, hide ther canoe in thet bit o' bresh, an' p'int our noses straight fer ther camp."

Letta nodded acquiescently, and a moment later they were pushing through the tangled undergrowth.

Unwittingly, the giant and his *protegee* had entered a fight against desperate odds.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALARMED.

"FURIES! Now, what is to be done? With that tell-tale paper in existence, my well-laid plans may miscarry at the last moment and blight forever the golden harvest I have worked so earnestly to gather! Even with the hermit dead and his daughter my wife, I would yet be in deadly danger, for with that accursed document in their possession either Dell Daunt or Captain Kate could wrest the mines from me and doom me to the gallows!"

"I must secure it, but how—*how*? I know not where it is, nor who holds it; I know only that the Sport cheated me of it, and that he would not have permitted it to perish in the Cherry-House fire."

Major Myst strode rapidly, fiercely, to and fro as the words came from between his clinched, hard-set teeth in hissing, barely-audible strains. His face was deathly white, and a despairing gleam lurked in his somber, bloodshot eyes.

The desperate adventurer had secured quarters at Riata's Ranch, and it is in a meagerly furnished room overlooking the main street of the camp that we find him, some two hours after the banishment of Dell Daunt.

To and fro, to and fro, until he reeled blindly from sheer weakness and sunk heavily into a chair, to grasp with trembling hands the bottle and glass on the table before him.

"It must be done!" he muttered, filling the glass to the brim. "One of the four—Daunt, Kate Cherry, Jenkins or Gray Wolf—has that paper, and my new pard shall help me to get it!"

Draining the glass, he lighted a cigar, rose and walked to the door, then paused and glanced anxiously at a crumpled sheet of blank paper and an opened envelope lying on the table.

"No danger there!" he gritted, with an oath. "I wish there was!"

Quitting the room, he carefully locked the door, thrust the key into his pocket and strode along the hallway to the apartments in which he had found Dandy Jim and Saul Bartol earlier in the night.

The murmur of voices within told him both mine-owners had returned to the chamber, and he rapped sharply.

Bartol appeared.

"Our friend, the major!" he exclaimed, stepping back and inclining himself profoundly. "Major, walk in."

The invitation was superfluous, as Myst was already making straight for a chair at the table at which Crocker was seated.

Closing and locking the door, Bartol quietly joined the pair.

"Well, major, what is it?" he asked. "Something unusual must have turned up to bring you here at this hour."

"Something unusual has turned up," Myst replied, a sinister gleam leaping into his dark eyes. "Something so desperately dangerous to us all that you must place the services of your tools, Curly Slayback and his Vigilantes, at my disposal at once, wholly and unreservedly!"

Dandy Jim uttered a prolonged whistle, while Bartol shook his head in an emphatic negative.

"Not until we know the purpose underlying such an unheard-of demand," he declared, his gaze shifting from the major to Crocker, then back again. "Such a concession would leave us well-nigh powerless. And—we have not been the best of friends!"

Myst uttered a savage oath.

"Tush! The past is gone!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "It is in your interest as much as my own that I make the demand."

"Then pray explain," Bartol requested, his hazel orbs meeting the fiery gaze of the major unflinchingly.

"Yes, for we shall never take such a leap in the dark," added Crocker.

Major Myst hesitated a moment, then seemed to rally his failing powers. A deadly smile crossed his white face, and he said, harshly:

"If you will cut good time to pieces, have it so!"

"Four lives stand between us and absolute safety, and any one of the four may doom us to the gallows."

"That precious agreement has slipped me, and it is now in the hands of Delmonte Coleridge, Long Pete Jenkins, Captain Kate, or the outlawed Crow chief Gray Wolf."

"Your ruse, then, to obtain possession of the paper was not a success?" interrogated Bartol with curling lip.

"No; I obtained the envelope, duly indorsed, but a sheet of blank paper had been substituted for the original agreement. The Sport must certainly have brought the document to camp with him, and if he did so it has passed into the hands of Captain Kate, or as we know her better, Kate Cherry. But if the document did not accompany him, it must be in the hands of Long Pete or Gray Wolf. At any—"

"Wait!" interposed Dandy Jim, bending forward with a peculiar light shining in his magnetic gray eyes. "Did I understand you to say that the names of Captain Kate and Kate Cherry belong to one and the same woman?"

"Assuredly."

"Are you positively sure of the fact?"

"As certain of it as I am that death ends life!" asseverated Myst, forcibly. "More than that, I can assure you that Captain Kate, or Kate Cherry, is none other than the widow of Randolph Coleridge!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated the two listeners, in a breath.

"No, it is a simple fact. How I learned the truth is neither here nor there, let it suffice that it is so."

"And now listen: you will urge, both of you, that I and I alone am threatened by the existence of this document, but—"

"We can urge nothing of the sort," Dandy Jim interrupted, with an impatient gesture.

"Your fate might discount ours a trifle in the

matter of time, but we could not escape the inevitable end. No, no! gentlemen! we are all three in the same boat, and a mighty frail boat it is, with that damning paper lying like a sunken rock in our course! Take the men, I say, major—take Slayback and his infernal gang and use them as you may think best to retrieve the point we have dropped!"

"What say, Saul?"

"I agree," answered the lesser villain, savagely gnawing at his nether lip. "Anything to ward off disaster."

"Then let us have Slayback here at once," Major Myst requested. "The sooner everything is arranged, the safer we shall be."

"I will summon him, immediately," Crocker returned, rising. "He is in the card-room below."

The Titan hastily quitted the room. Outside the door he paused, and in the semi-gloom of the hallway shook his clinched hand at his allies.

"You devils! you shall not harm her!" he vowed, in a deep undertone, his gray eyes gleaming like coals. "I'll stand between her and harm; and if it comes to the worst, your necks shall bear mine company to the halter!"

When he re-entered the room with the Vigilante chief a few minutes later, no trace of his agitation remained to betray him.

For upward of an hour the four men remained in close consultation. When at last their plans were perfected, the gray light of dawn was showing in the eastern sky.

Slayback was the first to depart, and he carried with him a round sum in gold.

The major then took leave of his allies and proceeded straight to his room.

"I can feel easier now," he mused, as he strode along the hallway. "With two strong parties ready to scour the hills in search of Captain Kate and Coleridge, a third lying in wait for Jenkins, and the cards stacked to shuffle the red-skin off as soon as he appears, affairs certainly seem in better shape."

Entering the room, he carefully locked the door, then looked around him.

Everything seemed just as he had left it.

"I can get an hour's sleep, and then be up in time to see the expedition start," he continued, throwing off his coat. "It is better—Aha! that cursed paper! I'll destroy it!"

Picking up the crumpled sheet of paper, Major Myst was about to apply it to the flame of the candle, when he drew back with a cry of astonishment, which quickly changed to fear.

Penciled across the sheet in bold strokes was the single line:

"WHO KILLED SANDY PARSONS?"

As his eyes drank in the fateful words, the cry died upon his palsied tongue, and with a face of deathly hue the adventurer sunk fainting to the floor.

At the same moment, Whisky Bill was stealthily quitting the hotel.

CHAPTER XIX.

SAUL BARTOL RECEIVES A SHOCK.

THE day dawned clear and bright, and at an early hour the camp was astir.

By sunrise a dozen miners had gathered about the blackened ruins of the Cherry House, to discuss the events of the preceding night, and the unanimous verdict, as expressed by the gray-haired veteran of the mines, had been:

"Et's a durned bad piece o' business, pards, an' thar's more ter come—mark that!"

Then had come the report that the Vigilantes were up and stirring to take the trails in search of captain Kate, the Lady Bandit, and the din and confusion resulting therefrom had speedily brought the entire camp to its waking senses.

"Et's a shame, pards, ter hound thet woman down," the veteran remarked, as he watched the Vigilantes go trooping out of camp. "Mebbe she's a bad 'un—I don't know; but I'll take oath she's no wuss'n thet gang trailin' at her heels."

"By heavens! you said the truth then, Larkspur!" cried Tom Sawyer, the superintendent of the Lone Hunter Mine. "The Vigilantes are a menace to the camp!"

"Keep a still tongue in your head, Tom

Sawyer!" uttered a harsh voice, and Major Myst stepped out of a group near by, his face pale and careworn, his dark eyes gleaming savagely. "In hunting down and routing out such characters as Captain Kate and that accursed Sport, so summarily dealt with last night, Slayback and his men are doing a good work, and, so long as you are in my employ, I do not choose to have you criticise them. Do you understand me?"

Sawyer's honest blue eyes flashed indignantly.

"I think I understand you, major—perfectly!" he returned, coolly. "My opinions are my own, however, and if I see fit to express them, I shall do so."

"Consider yourself discharged!"

"Willing'y!"

"An' heur goes with Tom!" shouted a miner near by.

"An' heur!—an' heur!" roared a dozen more.

"Fools!" uttered Myst, laughing sardonically. "Your places can be easily filled."

May be they kin, an' may be they cain't!" returned some one in the crowd, and then, amid a storm of jeers and epithets, the major strode away toward Riata's Ranch.

The forenoon wore slowly away. At ten o'clock the bodies of Giddy Norton and Sandy Parsons were carried down to the little cemetery below the camp and given decent burial, the old miner known as Larkspur acting as master of ceremonies.

Shortly after the return to camp the miners in the employ of Dandy Jim Crocker and Saul Bartol were paid off by the latter from the contents of the money-package recovered from the body of Sandy Parsons the night before, and, at the men's urgent request, the mines were closed for the remainder of the day.

When Major Myst reached Riata's Ranch directly after his rencounter with Sawyer, he found a man awaiting him in the bar-room.

The fellow wore the dress of the mines, and was well armed, was of slender, wiry build, dark almost as a red-skin, and bore upon his face the expression of a born cut-throat.

"Well, Dusky Dave, you are here at last, I see," exclaimed the major, as the fellow started toward him. "Empty-handed, too, I'll wager! Game must be getting scarce!"

"Scarce? Wal, I should suss so!" the rufian returned, while a grin distorted his brutal mouth. "Come, now, maje, cain't ye set up a leetle su'thin' ter drink? I'm so dog-goned dry my wind-pipe rattles!"

At a sign from Myst Riata set out a bottle and glasses.

"Go out the back way and go up-stairs," whispered the major, when the burly landlord's back was turned. "We must not be seen talking together. I'll meet you up there."

Dusky Dave closed one eye in an expressive wink, then drank his whisky and walked back to the gaming-tables.

A few minutes later Myst went out the front way, paused on the sidewalk to light a cigar while he glanced up and down the winding street, then stole softly up-stairs.

The desperado was in waiting.

"This way," uttered the major, and in another moment they were locked in the privacy of his room.

"Wal, boss," remarked Dusky Dave, coolly seating himself at the table and laying hold of the bottle, "I know wot's eatin' on yer, an' I won't waste no words."

"We didn't git yer man."

"You didn't get him?" exclaimed Myst, incredulously.

"That's wot I said," the rough declared, pouring himself a drink. "We didn't get him."

"How was that?"

"Bekase he was up ter snuff jest a wee bit better'n we were. Goin' up, he broke through ther line, an'—he never came back no more!"

"The deuce he didn't!"

"No, boss; he didn't. We laid traps in Death Grip Canyon an' on ther trail this side, an' ther men are thar yet. But he hesn't come back."

Major Myst sunk into a chair and uttered oath after oath.

"Et's no use ter cuss, boss," Dusky Dave

protested. "Such things will happen, an' ther on'y thing ter do is ter try ag'in."

"You are right, Dave," the villain admitted, springing to his feet. "Go back to your men. It is not too late for him to return, as he may have been delayed."

"And mark you, Dave, if he does come, and anything should happen him, I want you to fetch me every scrap of paper you find upon him, and I will give you double pay."

"Kerrect, boss—I ketches on."

"And one thing more, Dave: have you ever heard of the outlawed Crow chief, Gray Wolf?"

"I hes, boss, an' they do say he's a hoss."

"Well, he is coming down here from the camp that bears his name, and it may be that he will be with Jenkins. In any event, serve him just as you have been told to serve Jenkins, bringing me the papers found upon him, and I will again double your pay."

"I'll do et, major—I will, by jehocus!" cried Dusky Dave, rising. "An' don't ye worry thet either one o' them'll ever git inter Big Ledge over ther Gray-Wolf trail!"

Myst then unlocked the door and the desperado departed.

Alone, the major stretched himself at full length upon his cot.

"I don't like this delay," he mused, staring intently at the ceiling. "Jenkins is a cunning rascal, a thorough plainsman and mountain man, and the chances are big that he'll give Death Grip Canyon a wide berth on his trip back. But I can't move a step further than I have gone."

"Curse it! how complications are crowding upon me! As if this fight to hold the mine were not enough, I must needs fall out with Sawyer and the men. As soon as things cool down I must eat humble pie and repair that bit of mischief."

Like one in a trance lay the adventurer, unmindful of the flight of time, his brain deeply steeped in villainous plots and plans.

Not until the noon hour did he rouse himself, and then as he sat up the hum of many voices in the street caused him to spring from the cot and hasten to the window.

A hasty glance up the street, then down, and a sharp cry escaped him.

Coming toward the hotel, walking side by side, were Long Pete Jenkins and Letta Hart, the hermit's daughter!

"Good God! Reddy Flack and his pard have failed!" gritted the major, clenching his hands until the nails buried themselves in the yielding flesh. "Whall shall I do? What can I do? I must see Denbar at once, in spite of every hazard! The entire plot may have miscarried!"

Hastily preparing himself for the street, Myst quitted the hotel by the rear door and slipped around to the lawyer's office in the next building.

Gabriel Denbar was "at home."

"How now!—how now!" he cried, springing up from his office-table and nervously running his fingers through his crisply-curling black hair, as Myst burst into the room. "Shades of Blackstone! man, why must you act like a savage, or a lunatic, or a drunken idiot? Can't you enter like a civilized being? If you can't, keep away—that's all! I object to being startled like this!"

And Denbar angrily resumed his seat.

The major uttered a rasping oath.

"You're too squeamish, by half, Gabe Denbar!" he snarled, glaring at the lawyer with the look of a wild beast brought at bay. "If your nerves will permit, I would suggest that you go to the window and take a look into the street. There is something there which should be of vital interest to you."

"What do you mean?" asked Denbar, acridly.

"What do I mean? Simply that the tools of your choosing have failed—that the hermit's daughter is here in Big Ledge, under the protection of a man amply able to defend her against all ordinary odds!"

"Impossible!"

"No; I am stating the exact truth. Go to the window and convince yourself."

Denbar rose, crossed the room and looked out.

His face turned a dull, yellowish white.

"I see—I see!" he muttered, thickly. "It is queer—queer! I do not understand it. How could Flack have failed?"

"Don't ask me any questions," grumbled Myst, gloomily. "I suppose the whole precious plot is knocked to pieces. The girl has slipped through our fingers, and I'll gamble that the hermit doesn't show his face in Big Ledge this day!"

"I don't know about that. I think we can count on his coming, even yet. We'll know soon, and until—By the Lord Harry! major, that girl and the old plainsman are heading straight for my office, and Tom Sawyer is with them!"

"Then let me get out of sight," cried Myst, hastily, as he sprung to his feet. "It is better they should not see me here. Have—"

"You can't get out now without being seen," interrupted the lawyer, in a tone indicative of returning courage. "Come—here is a closet in which you can conceal yourself until they are gone."

Major Myst needed no urging. The steady tread of feet on the stairway told him that he had not a moment to lose, and he entered the closet and closed the door.

Denbar resumed his place at the table, and took up a package of legal-looking documents.

Scarcely had the rascal thus settled himself, when the office door was opened and Tom Sawyer entered, closely followed by Letta Hart and Long Pete Jenkins.

"Good-morning, Mr. Denbar," quoth the ex-superintendent, advancing to the table. "This lady and gentleman—Miss Hart and Mr. Jenkins—expressed a wish to see you, and I have brought them here."

"Obliged, I am sure," Denbar tersely returned, rising and smiling blandly as he motioned the trio to seats. "May I inquire as to the nature of your business with me?"

"Sart'in you may," Long Pete replied, assuming the office of spokesman. "Miss Letta Hart, hyar, wants ter know ef her father hes bin hyar this mornin'?"

"Hermit Hart?"

"So he is called."

"No; he has not been here."

"He was ter hev bin hyar, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir, he was."

"Ter git five thousand dollars fer a claim he sold you yistiddy, eh?"

Denbar turned to Letta.

"Miss Hart, do you wish that question answered?" he asked.

"I do," the girl replied.

"Very well, then. That was Hermit Hart's purpose in coming here. By agreement, I met him at his claim yesterday, examined it, and, on behalf of a client of mine who does not wish to appear in the transaction until the sale is consummated, agreed to pay him for it the sum of five thousand dollars."

"Hain't thet a putty steep figger fer a mine up that-a-way?" Jenkins asked.

"It would seem so," Denbar replied, shifting about in his chair. "But the claim is a good one, and the money can easily be gotten out of it."

"Ye think the hermit will be in yet?"

"Unless he has changed his mind. As I have said, the claim is a good one, and Hermit Hart is as shrewd as you find them."

Jenkins remained silent, and Letta, after a quick glance at his bronzed old face, asked:

"Mr. Denbar, is there any likelihood of my father's getting into trouble of any kind when he comes here?"

A slight frown gathered on the lawyer's brows.

"Yes, I think there is," he admitted, frankly. "But I am so situated that I must decline to answer any further questions under that head."

Letta then thanked the lawyer, and after a few commonplace remarks the trio quitted the office.

Denbar at once released Myst from the closet.

"Curse it! man, why didn't you find out something about Flack?" cried the latter, angrily, as he stepped out into the room.

"We're as much in the dark as ever. You might have drawn them out!"

"And in so doing, pointed to myself as the instigator of the attack!" sneered the lawyer. "Not much, major."

"But you stay here till I return. I nlist set a man to watching every move of that girl and her friends, and, my word for it, it'll not be many hours till you have another chance to win a wife!"

Myst sullenly assented, and helped himself to a chair.

Denbar had not been absent five minutes when the door was again opened, and Saul Bartol stepped quickly into the room.

"Hallo! major, you here!" he exclaimed leaving the door ajar and advancing to the center of the room. "Where's Denbar?"

"Gone out."

"Gone out, eh? Well, no matter. I'm looking for Crocker. The big rascal's gone, and been gone since morning. Didn't know but I'd find him here."

At that moment a slight noise at the head of the stairway startled the mine-owner, and he whirled around.

A brawny Indian stood in the doorway.

At sight of the red-skin, Saul Bartol staggered back, white and terrified, his dusky eyes aflame with horror, crying:

"Great God! It is Indian Pete—or his ghost!"

CHAPTER XX.

GRAY WOLF.

THE Indian bestowed on Bartol a look of strange intentness.

"Me no Injun Pete—me Gray Wolf, the Crow!" he exclaimed, in a dignified way. "White man's eyes see crooked."

"Noble red-skin, thou hast spoken with a straight tongue!" cried Myst, with a flourish. "To say the truth, our friend here has dallied too long with the flowing bowl, the fire-water. He is drunk!"

Bartol was quick to act upon the hint thus covertly conveyed.

"Yesh—yesh! Indian Pete's ghost—drunksh a lord!" he muttered, thickly, staggering about and finally dropping limply into a chair. "Don't wantsh ghost! Take ghost 'way!"

The crafty rascal's acting was vividly real—so good, in fact, that Myst looked at him doubtingly, but that expression of terrified despair yet held its grip on the mine-owner's face, and it disclosed the exact truth to the keen-eyed major as clearly as words could have done it.

"Heap drunk!" Gray Wolf observed, nodding sagely, yet with a cunning gleam in his dark eyes. "White man's a fool! Fire-water bad medicine!"

"The worst on earth!" solemnly declared the major.

"But does not Gray Wolf remember me?"

"Gray Wolf know you; you Major Myst."

"Yes. And now, may I ask, what brings you here?"

"Gray Wolf came to meet his white brothers, Long Pete and Coleridge, the miner. Man told Gray Wolf Long Pete up here, but me see him gone. Me go, too."

Major Myst would willingly have detained the Indian to question him further, but ere he could utter a word Gray Wolf had stepped back, turned and silently started down the narrow flight of stairs.

"For God's sake! let him go!" hoarsely uttered Bartol, divining the thought uppermost in the mind of the major. "It could do no good to keep the red rascal here, but would very likely hasten trouble."

Myst looked sharply at his ally.

"Now, what is the matter with you?" he demanded, rising and confronting the cowering mine-owner. "What is there between you and the red-skin? It is more than a fancied resemblance to Indian Pete on his part which has so completely unnerved you."

"There is nothing between us," Bartol protested, weakly. "I don't think I ever saw him before to-day. But he is the living image of Indian Pete, who was his brother."

The major nodded grimly.

"I think I understand!" he exclaimed. "Having killed Indian Pete, it was only natural that the sudden appearance of his living counterpart should throw you out of balance."

"That is it, exactly. But my peril at this moment may be as great—nay, it is greater than it could possibly be were this red-skin really Pete returned to life for Gray Wolf has sworn to hunt out and slay the man who killed his brother."

"Humph! your nerves are unstrung, and you magnify trifles. Even were Gray Wolf sure you are the man he seeks, the odds would yet be in your favor."

"Ordinarily, they would be, but in this case they are not. Gray Wolf is no ordinary Indian. He is said to be the greatest warrior the Crow tribe had produced in many decades. His personal prowess cannot be called in question. He is a master hand with every weapon the border knows, and he is as fearless as he is cunning and wise. I would rather be pitted against any three men in the camp than against this one Indian, fired as he is with the spirit of revenge."

"Quite a panegyric!" sneered Myst. "Saul Bartol, you are a fool! A knife or a pistol in the hands of a paid bravo would forever settle this paragon of the smoky hide within the hour!"

"You are over-confident," the mine-owner returned, with a visible effort to rally his powers. "Let me tell you something: Three times have I sent a fighting-man to Gray Wolf camp to wipe out this accursed chief. Not one has come back, and Gray Wolf yet lives!"

"You should have sent the three at once," observed Myst, coolly. "In a matter of this kind, you should never give the man you are going after an equal chance, for if you do there are long odds that in the end he will give you worst of it."

"That is true," Bartol admitted, rising and pacing moodily to and fro. "What would you advise at the present time, major?"

Myst reflected a moment.

"Well, we included this troublesome red-skin in our calculations this morning," he at length remarked, meeting the anxious gaze of his ally with an odd little smile; "but if I were in your shoes, I'd bank against my mishap by getting two or three plucky fellows to work at once, and then I'd lay for a chance at him myself. That's what I'd do."

"And that's what I'll do," Bartol exclaimed, with a desperate gleam in his dark eyes. "Thank you, major, for the suggestion. If I fail to win the trick, Dandy Jim'll be minus a partner!"

Assuring himself that his revolvers were in perfect order, the mine-owner at once took his departure, determined to hazard all on crowding matters to a head.

Major Myst lighted a fresh cigar, and rested himself at the window, to await Gabriel Denbar's return.

"Now that Bartol's got his hands full, I feel a hundred per cent. better," he muttered, as he gazed listlessly into the street. "With Gray Wolf to look after, the little rascal will hardly have time to double-bank me."

The lawyer was not long absent. When he re-entered the room, he wore the air of one having important news to communicate.

"They can't give us the slip," he announced, in a cautious undertone, when he had closed the door. "I've put two of the keenest nosed scoundrels in camp to watching them, and you can go bail we'll be up with every move made."

"Where did they take the girl?" asked Myst, eagerly.

"Down to Sawyer's cabin, and that's just the point I want to talk about, for the move threatens to endanger your schemes."

"How so?"

"Through the girl and Tom taking a fancy to each other. You know Tom is by no means bad-looking, and the girl—well, I envy the man that gets her, that's all!"

The major's brows darkened ominously.

"I'll be cursed if that hound gets her!" he cried, shaking his clinched hand savagely. "He'd better beware of crossing my path a second time!"

Gabriel Denbar gave an approving nod.

"That is the proper spirit!" he exclaimed, rubbing his thin hands softly together. "But seriously, major, you made a bad blunder in quarreling with Sawyer this morning, and you may feel its bad effects in more ways than one. You have made him your enemy, and you can count on the most of your force siding with him."

"Let the whole pack go, and it's good riddance!" grated Myst, with an oath.

"Have it that way, but you'll find you're mistaken," said Denbar, gravely. "They are all well armed, and if Sawyer takes a

notion to back the girl and her father these men will afford him a strong support—mind that!"

"What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to make peace with Sawyer and to put him and the men to work."

"Sawyer?"

"You're making a mistake!"

"You may say so, but I think not. If these men are so ready to turn against me, it would be madness to put them back in the mine. You know that Coleridge may return at any hour now—that Coleridge may return and attempt to jump the Lone Hunter claim; and if this thing does happen, I don't want men in the mine ready to desert me and join the enemy."

"There is a great deal in that," Denbar admitted, reluctantly.

"There is so much in it that I shall hold to the course I have laid for myself," Myst declared, firmly. "I can count on Slayback and his men, and they will probably return some time during the day or night."

"Which will be soon enough, unless something wholly unexpected should turn up," the lawyer remarked, reflectively. "In fact, I don't think you have anything to fear from this Coleridge, as it is not at all likely he'll ever return to Big Ledge."

"But right here is the point! When we arrest the hermit, Sawyer and his friends, urged on by the girl, may take a notion to set him at liberty and give him a safe convoy to a point beyond our reach. That step, as you must know, would place both the hermit and his daughter beyond your power and abort the whole scheme."

Myst nodded grimly.

"If anything of that sort is attempted, the hermit shall not live to leave the camp—that I promise you!" he vowed. "More than that, the night shall not go by without seeing Letta Hart safely in my power!"

"Very well, we'll call that point settled, and proceed to the next."

"Assuming that the hermit will certainly appear and meet with arrest, let us take a look at the evidence against him. What have we? Absolutely nothing!"

"Oh, yes, we have! There's Dandy Parsons's story, you know. Half a hundred men heard that last night," Myst returned, with a perceptible tremor in his voice.

"Yes, but unfortunately Sandy cannot appear, now that he's needed, and the fact that the money-package was found upon him is leading to the belief that Sandy himself was the assassin. But for this fact the tale would suffice in a camp like this."

"No, no! we haven't an atom of evidence, and we've got to manufacture some mighty quick, if we succeed in hanging Hermit Hart!"

"You ought to be able to fix that!" observed Myst, bitterly.

The lawyer laughed.

"Sure!" he returned, complacently. "I can produce evidence that no man in camp, with a due regard for his health, will dare dispute. But it will come high."

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"A thousand devils!" and Myst leaped angrily to his feet. "Denbar, at this rate, in a few days you will bleed me of my last cent of ready money!"

"Can't help that. I'm no common tool, ready to do the dirty work of a dirty rascal for a paltry few dollars. When you forget, Major Myst, that I am a gentleman of professional standing, it is high time that our relations cease. Do you understand that?"

"Have it your way," growled the major, sullenly resuming his seat. "Go ahead."

"Let me first assure myself that there is no one lurking about that stairway," Denbar returned. "Do you know, major, I believe this camp is infested with spies? I do, really, and I suspect that the greasy old vagrant known as Whisky Bill is the king-pin of the lot."

Myst started, and an oath escaped him.

"You are not far from right!" he exclaimed. "But, right or wrong, a little extra precaution just now will do us no harm, and it may insure victory in the end."

"That's the idea exactly," and, nodding approvingly, Denbar looked down the stairway, then left the office door wide open and returned to his conference with his "client."

For upward of an hour the two talked in

subdued tones, keeping an eye on the doorway.

Then suddenly a firm tread sounded on the stairs, and a moment later Dan Burgess, the marshal of Big Ledge, walked into the office.

"Hermit Hart'll be in camp this side o' five minutes," he announced, coming to a halt in the middle of the room. "What I wants ter know, Gabe Denbar, is, shall I 'rest him out thar, or lay fer him hyar?"

"Lay for him here," the lawyer quickly replied. "If he is not intercepted by his daughter or Jenkins, he will come straight to my office, and there'll be less chance of trouble here than in the street."

"That's Gospel!" grinned the desperado, and then the trio impatiently awaited the hermit's appearance.

Not long were they kept in suspense. Perhaps ten minutes had passed when, with the stealthy steps of an Indian warrior, Hermit Hart entered the room.

Pausing near the office table, he glanced restlessly from face to face, then turned to the lawyer with the abrupt query:

"Denbar, are ye ready ter pay? I'm hyar fer my five thousan' dollars!"

"I'll be ready to pay as soon as one other little matter is settled," the wily lawyer returned.

"Major, please close the door."

Myst moved forward in response to the request, but ere he could complete his part of the programme a tall form bounded lightly into the room.

It was Gray Wolf, the Crow Chief!

Uttering a sharp, snarling cry, Major Myst leaped forward and attempted to push the intruder out of the office.

A single pace the red-skin drew back, then his sinewy right arm shot out, and with a low moan Myst dropped in his track.

Resolutely, Gray Wolf confronted Burgess and the lawyer.

"The Crow Chief is no child!" he cried, an angry flame dancing in his dark eyes. "Let the pale-faces beware!"

And before the startled gaze of the evil pair he brandished a gleaming knife.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ARREST.

For a full minute not one of the four men in Denbar's office uttered a word.

The lawyer was the first to speak.

"And who are you, my red-skinned friend?" he demanded, with a threatening curl of his thin lips.

"I am Gray Wolf, the Crow!" the chieftain proudly replied.

Denbar nodded curtly and his expression changed.

"I have heard of Gray Wolf, and he is a brave man," he returned, with forced composure. "May I ask why the red chief comes here?"

"Hart, the hermit, has been touched by the Great Spirit. The wind whispered that Gray Wolf should watch over him and see that no harm comes to him."

The marshal laughed disdainfully.

"Ye've bin confabulatin' ith thet long-laid tramp down at Sawyer's cabin, ye red imp!" he cried, in belligerent tones. "Now, you mosey! Ye're not wanted hyar!"

"Gray Wolf is free. He comes or goes not at the white man's bidding!" retorted the chief.

Burgess drew his revolver.

"Now, you git, I say!" he blustered, brandishing the weapon in a threatening manner. "You've come ter a white man's camp, an' by ther ghost o' ole Brigham! ye'll toe ther mark or take a white man's medicine!"

"D'ye heur me, smoky-hide? D'ye know who's doin' this hyar shoutin'?"

"Your name Musket-mouth?" asked the chieftain, with the faintest trace of a grin lurking in the corners of his wide mouth.

"Musket-mouth! Nary, ye red imp!" roared the marshal, dancing with fury. "I'm Dan Burgess—'Desperate Dan,' ther boys call me—an' I'm Marshal o' Big Ledge! I'm the son o' a big gun, I am, an' I'm loaded ith buckshot an' chain lightnin'! When I spit, I spit fire an'— Take that!"

Swift as thought was the action of the blustering bully, for even as he spoke his revolvers dropped to a level with the breast of Gray Wolf; but swift and adroit as was the move, it was discounted by that of the cunning chief.

From the moment the revolver was drawn from its sheath, the piercing gaze of the red-skin had not wavered from the eyes of the marshal, and warned of his peril by the wicked gleam therein he had nimbly sprung aside just as the weapon exploded.

Like a flash of light the knife hand of Gray Wolf shot out. Point first, straight as an arrow in its flight, sped the gleaming blade, sinking to the hilt through the wrist of Burgess.

Uttering a yell of pain, the marshal dropped his revolver and staggered back, then, unnerved, sunk to the floor.

"You devil!" grated Denbar, now white to the lips, as he drew his knife and leaped toward the red chieftain. "You devil! I'll have your life!"

"White man is a fool!" scornfully returned Gray Wolf, deftly catching the lawyer's wrist and wrenching the knife away. "Me no hurt you now, but you have a care or Gray Wolf take your scalp yet!"

Disarming Denbar, the chief thrust him aside and turned to Hart.

During the brief but stormy scene just closed, the hermit had stood like one dazed, his eyes fixed dreamily upon the face of the Indian chief.

"How!" exclaimed the latter, extending his hand. "Does the gold-hunter remember Gray Wolf, the Crow?"

"Yas, yas! ye are Gray Wolf, the Crow," the hermit replied, slowly, and, it seemed, most reluctantly, while a troubled look crept into his face. "Yas, yas! An' whar is he—"

His voice faltered, then failed, and he passed his hand wearily across his brows.

"Et's thet cussed black spot!" he muttered, gloomily, after a moment. "Et comes, jest a speck, then spreads and spreads till et shets ther light all out! Ef 'twa'n't fer thet—"

"The gold hunter is in danger," interrupted Gray Wolf, with a gesture of warning.

"The white dogs seek to take his life, and if he not go soon with his red friend they will have it. Come!"

"No, no! I have come fer my money, an' I must git et," the hermit protested, his errand recalled by the thought of leaving. "You, Gabe Denbar, you rascally sharp! Shell out!"

"Not a dollar!" sullenly growled the lawyer, retreating to the window overlooking the street. "I told you there was another matter to be settled first."

With the snarl of an enraged beast, Hermit Hart stepped across the prostrate form of Major Myst and darted toward Denbar, his face aflame with passion, his long fingers working nervously.

"Stop!" ordered Gray Wolf, sharply, sternly. "The gold-hunter forgets himself!"

The hermit hesitated and glanced back at the face of the chief, then came to a full stop, trembling from head to feet.

"What would I do!" he exclaimed, in an anguished voice. "I hev no right ter lift my hand ag'in' thet man, mis'abulliar though he is!"

"The gold-hunter speaks the word of wisdom," Gray Wolf returned, and then bent his head in the attitude of listening.

The steady tread of many feet at the bottom of the narrow stairway greeted his ear.

"The white dogs are coming, and it is too late for the gold-hunter to escape," he announced.

The hermit's face cleared as if by magic, and the cunning gleam so characteristic of the man again appeared in his eyes.

"Et's jest as Letta said!" he muttered, in a keen undertone. "But I'll fool them yet! They'll find thet Hermit Hart's ther keenest of all ther Harts!"

If the cracked brain of the old mountain-man had conceived a plan to elude his enemies, he was given little time to study it in detail; for even as that boastful, half-audible sentence passed his lips, Riata Joe entered the office, at the head of a full half-score well-armed men.

"Throw up yer han's, yer measly ole galoot!" shouted the ruffian, leveling a revolver at the hermit. "Kiver him, pards, an' ef he stirs a peg, pull!"

Mechanically, Hermit Hart raised his empty hands, while Denbar, with a look of intense relief, quitted his position at the window.

"You're in good time, Joe—mighty good time!" he exclaimed. "Had you been a moment later, I'm afraid I would have suffered violence at the hands of the murderous old scoundrel!"

"Et do look es ef ye'd been havin' sum'at o' a scrimmage," Riata responded, with a glance at the prostrate forms of Major Myst and the marshal. "Derned lucky I heered ther racket an' got a few o' ther boys tergether ter 'vestigate ther matter, by crimony! 'Hallo! hallo! ef hyar ain't thet berdanged impident smoky-hide ag'in'!"

"Gray Wolf here—you bet!" the outlawed Crow asseverated, boldly stepping into full view of the crowd. "The white dog barks, but the red chief fears not him!"

"Ther red chief is breedin' a funeral fer hisself," retorted Riata, with an ugly scowl. "Twice!"

"Be careful how you cross that red serpent, Joe, for he is dangerous," quickly interpolated Denbar. "If you want any thing to back what I tell you, look at Myst and Burgess."

"He did that?"

"He did."

Riata uttered an oath.

"I think we'll gather him in too! Draw, boys—"

"White dog try that, some one die—quick!" enunciated Gray Wolf, sharply, and with a quick step backward he swung a brace of cocked revolvers to a level. "The Crow chief no coward to run away! When him wanted, he here to meet the men he hunt!"

"Better let it go et that, Joe!" warned Denbar, into whose mind a wholesome respect for the prowess of the red chieftain had crept. "After all, both Myst and Burgess forced the fight upon him."

"So be et—ye're boss o' this ranch!" gritted Riata, sullenly. "Ef I'd my way, Jedge Lynch 'dhev a job almighty quick!"

"There's more than one way to reach the same end," observed the lawyer significantly.

"And now, Joe, take our friend, the hermit, over and slap him into the lock-up. Warn Rough Rob to treat him decently, but to guard him closely and to admit no one to see him, as he is charged with deliberate murder."

"And there is another point to be looked after. This man must have a fair trial—no more, no less. To insure him that, the lock-up must be closely guarded, or some of the hot-heads of the camp may take a notion to batter down the doors and lynch him."

"Do you understand, Riata?"

"I'm dead onder yer graft, boss."

"And you'll attend to these matters?"

"I'll fix everything good an' hard, boss."

The hermit was then disarmed and searched. That task completed, his hands were securely bound behind him, and he was hurried down stairs and across the street to the rude log structure doing service as a lock-up.

Rough Rob, the keeper of the place, a bulky young German with tousled light hair and beard and sleepy-looking blue eyes, met the party and ordered them into the room adjoining the prison proper.

Here the hermit was duly committed to the jailer's care. Riata then explained Denbar's instructions pertaining to the treatment of the prisoner, and with his men withdrew from the building.

Gray Wolf had followed the crowd from the lawyer's office, had watched the proceedings at the lock-up with jealous care, and was the last to leave the gloomy place.

There was a look in the piercing eyes of the red-skin that boded mischief.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TWO STRANGE SPORTS.

LETTA HART was in an agony of fear and foreboding when she learned that her father had been arrested on the charge of murder.

It had fallen to the lot of Tom Sawyer to bear the news to her, and it is only just to

say that the bland Hercules acquitted himself of the task with a degree of tact and delicacy hardly to be looked for in a rough man of the mines.

"They will hang him!" sobbed Letta, while the tears coursed down her white cheeks. "Oh! I know they will hang him!"

"Never!" vowed Tom, who was almost as pale as the girl. "I don't believe your father ever killed Giddy Norton. They'll have to prove him guilty first, anyway."

"Sure's shootin'—ef they let et go ter trial," added Jenkins, with a peculiar glance at Tom. "Tany rate, Miss Letta, ye kin 'pend on us doin' all we kin ter save yer daddy. Reckon Tom an' me c'd put in some mighty big licks fer your sake."

"Me, too," put in Gray Wolf, with the utmost gravity. "Me know gold-hunter many moons ago. He fight then for Gray Wolf, Gray Wolf fight for him now."

"But the pale-face girl speak with straight tongue. They hang gold hunter to-night, try him him to morrow!"

Letta's sobbing grew more violent.

"Ye shouldn't say that, chief. Et on'y distresses ther gal," Jenkins protested, in a tone of impatience. "Time enough fer her ter know ther wu'st when we hev failed!"

"Gray Wolf tell the truth—no use to lie," the chief retorted, calmly. "We know something, and pale-face girl know something, too. She stop her cry and talk, we find out a heap, mebbe. Then we know what do."

"Gray Wolf's right. It is weak in me to weep now, when I should work," Letta averred, brokenly, but with a brave effort to repress her grief. "I do indeed know something which may throw a ray of light upon the dark predicament in which my poor father finds himself."

Thereupon, the girl related her adventures with Sandy Parsons the preceding day, and repeated the conversation between herself and her father concerning the sale of the hermit's worthless claim to Gabriel Denbar. Then followed the story of the hermit's departure that morning to collect his money, and the subsequent invasion of his retreat by Reddy Flack and his desperate pard.

The three men listened attentively, even eagerly—Long Pete, to obtain more light upon certain points touched on but briefly during the girl's hurried narration to him at an earlier hour; Gray Wolf, to find facts to sustain the theory already formed, by his cunning brain; and Tom Sawyer, that he might know just what to do to serve this fair girl in whom he felt such a deep and growing interest.

"Me see now!" Gray Wolf exclaimed, with a vigorous nod, as Letta ceased speaking. "We fix 'em—you see!"

"There has been a vile plot against not only your father, but yourself as well, Miss Hart," declared Sawyer, his blue eyes sparkling with indignation. "I have come to the conclusion that a gang of the meanest rascals unhung infest this camp, and the sooner we rid ourselves of them the better for all concerned."

"Ye're jest right thar, youngster!" Jenkins affirmed. "An' from what ye've told me, an' from what I already s'pected, I opine thet this hyar Major Myst is ther meanest varlet in ther lot."

"Et do look es ef I'd orter go find my pard's trail an' hunt him up, but I can't tear myself away from this liddle gal jest yit. My pard w'dn't heer ter et, nohow, an' so I stays till ther game's played."

"Putt et thar, pard! Thet was spoken like a white man!" Sawyer exclaimed, unconsciously lapsing into the camp vernacular. "I've got a plan I think'll work. Ef Miss Hart'll stay hyar, we'll go in t'other room an' talk et over."

Letta bowed in hopeful acquiescence, and the three men withdrew to the outer room of Sawyer's cabin.

We must now go back to the lawyer's office.

As the posse gotten together by Riata Joe crowded down the narrow stairway with their prisoner, Denbar hastened after them and touched the rearmost on the shoulder.

"Hunt up Skaggs and send him to me, Billy," he requested, as the fellow turned around. "Here's a dollar to put wings on your feet; and tell Skaggs to hurry."

The man grasped the coin, nodded, and pushed on after the crowd, while the lawyer returned to his office window.

Skaggs was not long in making his appearance. He was a lean, ragged, miserable-looking scallawag, a complete wreck physically and near the verge mentally; but he possessed some knowledge of surgery, and as fights were of frequent occurrence in Big Ledge, he managed to keep comfortably drunk off his income from probing for bullets, sewing up cuts, and patching broken noses.

"Here's a couple of little jobs for you; doctor," announced Denbar, laying particular stress on the title, as the wretch stepped gingerly into the office. "Of course I've no wish to hurry a man of your caliber, but I'd respectfully recommend that you lose mighty little time in getting to work."

"Nothin' ser'us—nothin' ser'us. I 'sure you," Skaggs replied, with a lofty gesture, as he laid aside his battered tile and glanced from one to the other of Gray Wolf's victims. "Some gallons o' good blood wasted, mebbe, but now 'at I'm hyar I reckon they'll rekiver."

The vagabond then removed his coat and pushed up his shirt sleeves. These preliminaries over, he rubbed the tip of his red nose reflectively, and again looked from Major Myst to the marshal.

"Got any good brandy, Gabe?" he asked, turning abruptly to the lawyer. "This job's goin' ter be tougher'n I thort—a heap sight!"

Denbar produced and handed over a well-filled flask. Doctor Skaggs took a long pull at the ardent contents, then shoved the bottle into his hip-pocket and set to work in earnest.

That the vagabond had at one time been a skilled surgeon was evidenced by his work, for in a very few minutes he had both Myst and Burgess upon their feet—the first with a broken nose and badly damaged face; the marshal with a neatly bandaged arm, which would be useless as long as he lived.

After a few finishing touches, Skaggs extracted a fee from each of his patients, then departed, accompanied by the marshal, whom he had promised to help up to his room at the Riata's Ranch.

"Well, major, it strikes me you tackled the wrong man this time," the lawyer remarked, as soon as they were alone. "By George! I don't think I ever saw so badly disfigured a mug! Nose broken, one eye swelled shut, and one cheek cut to the bone! All at one blow, too! That red-skin must be a—"

"Let up!" snarled Myst; with a furious oath, his voice sniffling and indistinct. "That red has struck his own death-blow! You go out and hunt up Bruiser Bill. I want him!"

"I'll go, dear boy; but I'm going to tell you, you're picking mighty poor timber to go against that red-skin. Better wait till Slayback turns up."

Myst glared savagely at his adviser.

"Fetch Bruiser Bill!" he gritted. "I know what I'm doing!"

"And that settles it—of course!" sneered Denbar, turning away.

Fortunately for the patience of Major Myst, the object of the lawyer's search was soon found. Sending the ruffian on to the office, Denbar strolled leisurely about the camp.

"I'll keep clear of that deal," he muttered, a shrewd look crossing his thin, dark face. "No good can come of it, and—it may end mighty bad!"

The remainder of the afternoon passed without the occurrence of anything worthy of note, and with the coming of night the camp's denizens began to appear in considerable numbers at Riata's Ranch.

All felt that the night was to be one of excitement, perhaps of peril, and as a result nearly every man carried his full complement of weapons.

Noticeable among the crowd were many of the Lone Hunter men. Their faces wore an anxious look, but their nerves seemed steady, and in the eyes of each could be seen a determined glitter. They drank sparingly and held aloof from the card-tables.

Riata Joe was absent from his accustomed

post until after eight o'clock, as it had fallen to him to perform the marshal's duties, in the way of posting guards about the lock-up and otherwise looking after the safety of the prisoner.

The burly landlord was not the only one of the camp's notables missing. Bartol, Major Myst and the marshal were all absent, while it was currently reported that neither Dandy Jim Crocker nor Whisky Bill had been seen all day.

It was also a matter of comment that Gabriel Denbar had not put in an appearance, as he was usually one of the first to seek the card-tables for an evening game.

Taken all in all, there was just a tinge of mystery in the air—a faint, indescribable shadow hinting at something impending, and each man felt that he was justified in having buckled on an extra weapon.

Shortly after Riata Joe had returned and stepped into his place behind the bar, the whisky began to flow freely—a fact which caused the more sober and peaceable of the miners to shake their heads gravely and look askance at each other.

By ten o'clock fully one-half of the inmates of the saloon and gambling-hell were so far under the influence of the villainous liquor as to be ripe for any deed of evil. Oaths became more frequent, and muttered threats and allusions to Judge Lynch could be heard on every side. Then the rougher and lower element of the crowd, headed by three or four of the more notorious ruffians of the camp, began to gather in groups between the bar and the card-tables. Here their voices sunk to husky undertones, and it shortly became evident that an important move of some sort was under discussion.

About this time, the Lone Hunter men began quietly to leave, going singly and in pairs and attracting as little attention as possible. By eleven o'clock, but four remained out of a number originally exceeding a score. Two of the four mingled freely with the conspirators at the rear of the room, while the remaining two stood at the upper end of the bar, near the door.

Suddenly, there came a lull in the low-toned, earnest conversation. As if pursuant to a prearranged plan, the various groups massed into one, and from one of the leaders, in a hoarse, impassioned voice, came the words:

"We'll hang the hermit! We'll hang him high as Haman!"

And almost to a man, the crowd caught up and repeated the words.

But at that moment came a startling diversion.

Into the room strode a man of massive build, armed to the teeth, and garbed in an odd admixture of the raiment of the cowboy and the miner. His hair, in color a deep, glossy red, rested in a tangled mass upon his shoulders, while a short, stubbly beard, only a shade lighter, covered his face almost to the eyes.

And that face! It was an incarnation of brutishness, heightened and intensified by the wolfish glare of the big, black, blood-shot eyes.

In each of his huge and powerful hands this villainous desperado held a cocked revolver, and as he advanced toward the crowd he held the weapons level, swinging them from side to side in a way at once careless and threatening.

"Whar is he? Whar is he?" he howled, in a deep and penetrating voice, as he advanced step by step. "Whar is he? D'ye hear w'ot I say? Show me ther critter es wants ter turn a white man's camp ups' down! D'ye hear? Trot him out! Don't hide him, ye skulkin' houn's, fer I hes swared ter wear his skulp! Hide him, an' I'll take you!"

A moment of intense silence followed his vivid outburst.

"Who is et ye want, Bruiser Bill?" inquired Riata Joe, in a respectful tone. "Nobody hyar, I hope!"

"Nobuddy hyar, ye hope!" snarled the desperado, with merely a glance at the burly landlord. "Dang yer hope! I'm lookin' fer ther 'ar perilferous red-skin es mangled up ther whitest man in ther camp—meanin' Des'prit Dan, in course. They say Dan'll never use his arm ag'in, an' though we hain't allers bin jess ther best o' friends, I'm ther bloody pirit ter avenge him!"

"Et's ther Injun chief, Gray Wolf, ye want," said Riata, hesitatingly. "But, Bruiser—"

"Bit nor but—nary!" yelled the desperado, with a frightful burst of profanity. "I've heered ther red devil's in yer shebang, an' et's Gray Wolf I want!"

"Gray Wolf here!" and with the quietly uttered words the Crow chief stepped into the room.

A thrill of surprise ran through the crowd, while Bruiser Bill with a quick bound planted his back against the wall and resolutely faced the bold red-skin.

"Gray Wolf here!" repeated the dauntless chief, grimly. "What Big Tongue want?"

Then a murmur of admiration rose from the crowd, for all saw that the cunning red-man held the drop on the blustering bully.

Bruiser Bill was quick to realize that he had been too slow with his weapons—that he was at the mercy of the man he had sought to slay, and in a voice hoarse with sullen rage replied:

"I wants yer life, an' I wants et bad!"

"I'll fight ye squar, man ter man!"

"Gray Wolf fight!" was the prompt response, and then a wild cheer broke from the turbulent spirits at the rear of the room, for all felt that the bully of Big Ledge had at last met the man who would give him the fight of his life.

In the midst of the confusion, two strangers slipped in unobservedly, and took their stand at the front end of the bar.

That both were sports a single glance would have decided, for attire, weapons and bearing all attested the fact.

One was a trim, nicely-built man of middle age, dressed in a suit of black velvet with buttons of solid gold, a glossy beaver hat and patent-leather shoes, while a sash of some soft crimson stuff encircled his waist and supported his side-arms.

His face was a pleasant one, with bright, blue-gray eyes, and a glossy brown beard descended almost to his waist, while his dark hair fell in waving tresses around his shoulders.

The second sport was of short, bulky figure, with blue eyes, closely-cropped red hair, and carefully trimmed mustache and imperial. He was several years older than his companion, and was clothed and armed in much the same manner.

When the tumult following Gray Wolf's prompt acceptance of the challenge had, in a measure, subsided, the younger sport stepped back from the bar, flourishing a handful of crisp bank-notes over his head, and cried:

"A thousand dollars even that the red-skin whips his man!"

As his voice rung out, clear as a bugle's peal, an instant hush came over the crowd, and all eyes turned to the strange sport.

Then from the rear of the room, in tones hardly recognizable as the voice of a human, came the response:

"I'll take that bet. And if I win, every dollar of the money goes to Bruiser Bill!"

The speaker was Major Myst, and with the last words he strode rapidly toward the bar.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE STRANGE SPORTS TAKE A HAND.

"Et's Major Myst, an' his money talks!" exclaimed Riata Joe, addressing the two strangers. "But tech him lightly, pards, fer he's hed a fall with ther red-skin hisself."

"Do tell!" the sport ejaculated, with a hard little laugh, as he stepped back to the bar. "The fellow'd make a mighty good sign for a first-class hospital!"

"Yes, I guesses he would," admitted Riata, reluctantly. "Howsumever, ther Crow didn't do all of et, es ther major hed a pistol wound in his hand, which he hurted when he fell, so 'ut he's got ter wear his arm in a sling for a few days."

"But hyar he comes, pards, an' ef ye'll jest sling me yer handles I'll give ye a knock-down, so's everything 'll be reg'lar-like."

"I'm called Cool Cy, and I'm all the way from Cheyenne," the sport returned. "The corpulent gentleman with me we call Royal Godsend."

At that juncture, Myst approached the

bar, and, when the landlord had gotten through his form of introduction, which included a drink all around, the major pulled a plethoric wallet from his pocket, saying, in his broken voice:

"I'm here to cover your money, gentlemen. Put up or shut up!"

"Hyar she is," Cool Cy cried, nimbly counting off ten crisp new hundred dollar bills from the roll in his hand. "Cover it!"

Myst promptly put up his money, and Riata Joe was named as stake-holder.

"Well, now, major, I don't jest like this hyar thing o' bettin' permise'us, but they do say Royal Godsend knows a cinch when he sees et, an' I reckon I'll hev ter hang up a bluff of a thousand ther same way," wheezed the fleshy sport, softly slipping in between the two men. "Et do look like jumpin' on a cripple ter say et, but I've heered et whispered, since I've bin in this hyar camp, thet ther red-skin's allmighty handy."

The major's single eye glared balefully at the ruddy visage of the speaker.

"Understand, I ain't a-crowdin' ye," Royal Godsend went on to say, in the same wheezy, yet confident voice, as he pulled a handful of bills from his pocket and slowly counted out the sum named. "I'm putty square, fer a cuss so round as I be, an' I don't mind sayin' 'twouldn't be jest right ter take advantage o' yer feelin's in ther matter;

"Ring off!" grated Myst, with a savage oath, again opening his wallet and extracting a bundle of bills. "The red-skin is a good man, no doubt, but he's no match for Bruiser Bill, and my money says so."

"And that puts it into my head that I can squeeze another bet out of you, major," Cool Cy remarked, a tantalizing smile parting his bearded lips and disclosing two rows of gleaming white teeth. "We've got to profit by the mistakes of others, you know, and I confess I'd like a chance to rope in a few more of your seads."

"The case stands just like this: I've got an even thousand left, and I'd like to go it all that you lose both your wagers!"

"Done!" grated Myst, despite a warning look from Riata, who began to suspect the strangers had run in a "ringer" to line their pockets. "Done! but it's the last bet I'll make to-night, win or lose!"

"Enough's as good as a feast," quoth Royal Godsend, with a chuckle.

During this bit of by-play, Gray Wolf had kept Bruiser Bill constantly covered, much to that ruffian's disgust, for he was wild with anxiety to catch his cunning foe off his guard and thus get in a death-shot.

Such tricks were directly in the line of Bruiser Bill's tactics, as he scrupled at nothing to win a fight. An arrant braggart and bully, he yet possessed desperate courage and cared little for human life, as was amply attested by his red record in Big Ledge.

"Now for the picnic!" cried Cool Cy, when the last stake had been placed in Riata's hands. "As a challenge has been given and accepted, I move that this affair be conducted strictly according to the code."

"That's it! that's it!" yelled some one in the crowd. "A reg'lar duel!"

A roar of assent greeted the proposition.

"Thet suits me!" gritted Bruiser Bill, savagely. "We'll fight with revolvers, an' fight to ther death!"

"Hold on! hold on!" the sport exclaimed, staring hard at the enraged bully. "You're altogether too fast, young man!"

"As the challenged party, the red-skin holds the choice of weapons, time and place."

"Revolvers all right," Gray Wolf remarked.

"When and where do you want to fight?"

"Here—now," was the terse reply, and again a roar went up from the crowd.

"This is whooping things up with a vengeance," observed Cool Cy, with a cynical smile, when the tumult had subsided.

"Now, there's another point to settle. According to the usual way of doing such things, each of these thirsters for gore is entitled to a second, and if no one's inclined to kick I'll volunteer to act for the red-skin, giving the major here the privilege of performing, or naming some one to perform, a like office for his man."

"What say?"

Myst looked doubtfully at the landlord, then said:

"If Riata 'll act, well and good. If not—"

"Oh, I'm yer h'arpin—bet yer boots!" the landlord put in. "I'm a leetle rusty in serh rackets, mebbe, but what I lack in fine figgerin' I kin make up in hoss-sense."

"We'll call it a go, then," nodded Cool Cy. "And I reckon the sooner we get everything settled now, the better for all concerned."

"Thet's ther ticket," Riata declared, coming from behind the bar. "Say we put ther critters fifteen paces apart an' turn 'em loose, eh?"

"I suppose that'll answer. Put them back to back. When all is ready, our friend Godsend will count one—two—three, and at the word three both are at liberty to turn and fire, or adopt such other tactics as may seem best to them."

"Thet sounds like good hoss-sense, an' as one place is es good es another I'll jest take Bruiser Bill back an' put him in posish, while you take your man for'ard an' do ther same. Reckon we kin guess at ther distance nigh enough."

"Yes, yes; a step or two more or less will make mighty little difference," the sport returned with the easy assurance of a man confident of winning his wager, and then each of the seconds advanced toward his principals.

"Hold up a minute! Thar's one other leetle matter es ought ter be understood," exclaimed Royal Godsend, "I've bin elected as sort of master of ceremonies, an' I jest want ter say thet et ther fu'st show o' foul play on either side I'll bore somebody's head with a 44-bullet! Understand—all?"

"Thet's ther caper," assented Riata, urbanely, and the fleshy sport drew and cocked his revolver.

Then, while the crowd parted right and left and fell back to the walls, the duelists were placed in position, Gray Wolf facing the open door, Bruiser Bill the card table at the rear of the room.

That done, the seconds joined the crowd ranged against the walls, and in a sharp, clear tone Royal Godsend gave the words:

"One—two—three!"

Simultaneously, the motionless duelists sprung into action—Bruiser Bill wheeling squarely around and firing a splendid line shot; Gray Wolf leaping nimbly aside and falling to his knees ere turning.

A wild shriek of agony from the street—a bitter oath from the over-confident bully—then the weapon of the cunning red-man cracked thrice, the three reports ringing out almost as one, and Bruiser Bill fell in an inert heap, shot through both shoulders and with his right ankle shattered.

Again was Gray Wolf triumphant, and with a face as colorless as ashes Major Myst turned and hurried toward the rear stairway, to seek the seclusion of his room.

"I reckon et 'll be some months afore Bruiser Bill hunts another fight," Riata dryly remarked, when the noise had so far subsided that he was able to make himself heard. "An' I guess he 'll never be quite ther man he was, though Skaggs ain't no slouch at patchin' a man up."

"But, sports, hyar's yer money, for ye've made et square. An' ef ye 'll take a fool's advice ye'll git thet dorned red-skin out o' Big Ledge jist es soon es ye kin. Bruiser Bill's no pet in this hyar leetle camp, but et do go ag'in' ther grain ter see a smoky-skin do up a white man."

"From the width of the swath Gray Wolf's been cutting in this camp, I kinder think he 'll be able to look out for himself," Cool Cy returned, as he pocketed his money.

At that juncture, four men entered the place, bearing a slender, black-clad form, which they gently lowered to the floor.

These men were the guards whom Riata had stationed at the lock-up, and as the crowd surged forward and looked down at their ghastly burden, a murmur of surprise, not unmixed with horror, arose.

In that slender form lay all that was mortal of Gabriel Denbar, the lawyer. The single bullet fired by Bruiser Bill had pierced his heart!

Before a word could be uttered, however, a heavy form came lumbering through the

doorway, and Rough Rob, the jailer, now a picture of fright and despair, confronted the crowd.

"Der brisoner!" he spluttered, clawing helplessly at his flaxen hair. "Der brisoner!"

"Ther prisoner—what?" thundered Riata, with a swift glance around the room.

"Ach Gott! der brisoner! der mob!"

"Mob!" repeated Riata, and then like a flash of light the truth came to him, and with a bound he cleared the bar, revolvers in hand, just as a steady trampling of horses without announced the return of the Vigilantes. "Foller me, pards! Et's Sawyer an' his crowd, an' ef we don't look sharp they'll get ther murderin' hermit away! Foller me, quick! Slayback's with us!"

"Thet I be, ef ye've said true!" and with the words the Vigilante chief appeared at the door.

Uttering a wild yell, the roughs of Big Ledge surged forward, weapons in hand, ready and anxious for the battle to open.

"Come on, pardner! We can't roll back the tide, but we may yet cheat it of its prey!" uttered Royal Godsend, sharply, his fingers fastening in a grip of steel upon his companion's arm. "Ware hawks! a bad play now may spoil all!"

"Truth, every word of it!" Cool Cy responded, even as the lurid glitter in his blue eyes deepened. "Move! I'll follow!"

A bound carried Godsend to the door, another into the darkness of the street, with the man from Cheyenne at his heels. There the tall form of the Crow chief confronted them.

"How!" Gray Wolf exclaimed, gripping the hand of Cool Cy. "The eyes of the red chief are as keen as the eagle's. He see where white dogs are blind."

"Come! Follow Gray Wolf!"

"But the hermit!"

"Him safe—you bet!" and the chief drew the two sports away from the jostling throng. "White dogs plot to kill him, but the Crow chief hear, and the Crow chief fool 'em! White dog tell guards when pistol speak at saloon, guards must run away to see, so mob come git the gold-hunter and hang him. Crow chief go to saloon and fight, and guards come see. Gold-hunter's friends go to lock-up, get him; when mob come, he gone."

"You savey?"

"Heap savey!" chuckled Godsend. "I reckon you're no slouch, chief!"

"Gray Wolf great chief," the red-skin declared, with the utmost complacency.

At that moment a wild uproar at the lock-up attested the truth of the chief's statement concerning the hermit.

The vanguard of the mob had reached the building, only to find the cage empty.

The hermit had indeed escaped.

"Heap hurry now, or we no meet our friends," the chief urged, dashing away in the darkness.

Cool Cy kept at his heels, and was in turn closely followed by Godsend, who displayed agility and lightness of foot little short of marvelous in one of his bulky build.

A sharp run of perhaps three minutes carried the three to the lower end of the camp, where Gray Wolf slackened his pace to a brisk walk and uttered a clear bird-like signal.

An answering call came from the shadows surrounding a cabin a few rods away, and in another minute the sports and their guide were surrounded by Tom Sawyer and his friends.

Gray Wolf briefly explained the presence of Cool Cy and his pard, vouching for them in such terms as could leave no doubt as to their trustworthiness, and the two men were heartily welcomed.

"Every friend counts," averred Sawyer, earnestly. "Slayback and his crowd are easily two to our one, but they have ruled the camp with a rod of iron as long as we can endure it, and here and now we propose to bring the gang up with a short turn."

Before either of the sports could utter a word, a warning signal came from a sentry posted some distance away, calling Sawyer to the front; then another, and the man came running in.

"They're comin', Tom!" the guard announced, in a husky undertone, as he met

Sawyer a few yards from the cabin. That's a big crowd of 'em, an' they're creepin' up in ther dark ter give us a surprise."

"Go back to the boys, Mike, and tell them to stand ready," Sawyer returned, and then as the man sped toward the cabin the ex-superintendent's voice rung out, clear and cold.

"Halt! you scoundrels! Don't attempt to crowd us!"

A moment of silence followed, broken only by the low murmur of voices at a distance. Then in hoarse tones came the question.

"That you, Tom Sawyer?"

"You've called it, Curly Slayback! And now I warn you and your gang to clear out or take the consequences!"

The Vigilante chief uttered a jeering laugh.

"Quinsequences be derved!" he retorted, in a blustering tone. "Ye talk mighty brash, Tom Sawyer, but we know what force ye got!"

"Now, you give up ther hermit an' we'll let ther hull matter drop. Try ter keep him, an' we'll wipe yer leetle gang off'n ther face o' ther airth!"

"You say so, but try it once, Curly Slayback!" was the undaunted retort. "We're thirty strong, and well-armed, and we mean business!"

"We've grown tired of your rule, and we've organized as the Regulators of Big Ledge, with the avowed intention of rooting out the Vigilantes!"

"Now, if it's fight you want, come on!"

And with that bold challenge Sawyer turned and strode back to the cabin, while an angry yell went up from Slayback and his men.

It was the beginning of the end!

The camp was at last divided against itself, for the men of Big Ledge had resolved themselves into two distinct, opposing factions!

A silence deep and unbroken succeeded that wild outburst. Then a sharp command jarred through the blackness of the night, and the Vigilantes swept toward the cabin with the fury of an avenging horde!

CHAPTER XXIV.

DANDY JIM'S SECRET MISSION

"LADY! have no fear of me! Not for the wealth of worlds would I harm so much as a hair of your head, wicked as I am!"

The words burst from the lips of Dandy Jim Crocker in strains low, intense and earnest as he suddenly confronted the Lady Bandit in her cavern retreat.

"I have no fear!" the mysterious woman coldly responded, steeling her nerves to face the intruder fearlessly. "Why should I? My men are within reach of my voice, and the brave fellows do my bidding and do it well!"

"I doubt it not, lady, for even I would find it a pleasure to obey your slightest wish," the Titan declared, his burning eyes never leaving the veiled face of the woman. "Indeed, it is to serve you that I am here!"

"Indeed?" and Captain Kate's voice rung with scorn. "You surprise me, Colonel Crocker!"

"Don't condemn me unheard, lady!" entreated Dandy Jim, impetuously advancing a pace. "I have been a mighty black sheep, it is true, but you should remember that even the meanest of creatures have some redeeming traits."

"Oh, yes! that is true enough," the woman admitted, with a reluctant nod. "But it is equally true that exceptions prove the rule. You have, to put it mildly, never been a friend of mine, Colonel Crocker!"

"You will pardon me, madame, but it is there that you make a mistake! From the day you first entered Big Ledge as Kate Cherry, you have had no warmer, truer friend than Jim Crocker!"

Captain Kate laughed bitterly.

"You have at last penetrated my secret!" she exclaimed, in a cutting tone. "It is as well, colonel, for the dual role will no longer serve me. Last night's work settled that!"

"You attribute that outrage to me?"

"In part, yes. Why not?"

Dandy Jim's face grew white and agitated. On his broad forehead beads of sweat gleamed coldly in the flickering firelight.

"Great God! woman, would you sink me to the level of the brutes?" he cried, hoarsely. "Outlaw and desperado I am, I fully admit, for contact with mankind has made me that, and more, perhaps; but to deliberately or knowingly wrong a woman, is a step lower than Jim Crocker has ever fallen. That I swear by the memory of a sainted mother!"

And the voice of the Titan, clearing as he proceeded, rung with unconscious pride.

"For your own sake, I am glad you can say as much, Colonel Crocker," Captain Kate returned, coldly.

"That I have spoken the truth, and that I am here as a friend, let me prove by word and act," pursued the Titan, bitterly, yet in a calm strain, his gaze wandering from the veiled face to the flickering embers of the fire. "It is a humiliating task, but my duty is plain, and now that the path is open before me, I cannot shrink."

"Spare yourself, colonel! I have sued for nothing at your hands—not even naked justice! It is utterly useless for you to speak, for though you lay your head upon the block in my behalf, yet would I regard you as an enemy. The blackness of the past can be obliterated by no present sacrifice, however great!"

Dandy Jim started as if stung, and again his burning gaze met the coldly-gleaming eyes of the Lady Bandit.

"Stop!" he exclaimed, with an imperious gesture. "It is of that past that I am here to speak, to lay bare the whole hideous truth, to offer such atonement for my part therein as you may demand!"

"You know, then—"

"I know that Randolph Coleridge was your husband!" swiftly, almost fiercely.

"I learned as much last night, and—"

"Shall I speak plainly, madame, or hide the bitter truth and conceal the motive impelling me to come here at the risk of life itself to tell you all?"

"Speak plainly!" tersely replied Captain Kate, for the first time betraying a sign of more than passing interest.

"Then, madame, permit me to say that that knowledge turned my heart to ashes!" continued Dandy Jim, in low, intense tones. "From the moment you had entered the camp as Kate Cherry, I had loved you—secretly, but fervently, ardently!"

"Stay! it is not to urge that hopeless passion upon you that I am here! That would be useless—useless! I disclose it now, only that you may be assured of my sincerity in attempting to right whatever of wrong you may have suffered at my hands, directly or indirectly."

In utter silence the woman inclined her head.

"To make all clear—to lay the naked truth before your eyes that you may choose the proper course—I must go back to the beginning," pursued the Titan, his gaze again seeking the glowing embers, as if from their lurid depths he would conjure the scenes of the horrid past.

"It was in Boise City, nearly six years ago, that five men, all fugitives from justice, were thrown together by a peculiar train of circumstances, upon which I need not here dwell. Let it answer that the five were Saul Bartol, Curly Slayback—then known as Billy Briggs—Si Haydock, a red-skin widely notorious under the name of Indian Pete, and since then killed by Bartol, and last—myself. As but one course was left to any of us, and that course outlawry, we banded ourselves together by a fearful oath, to break which was death."

"In Boise City at that time was an old mountain-man famed the West over as a successful gold hunter. With him was a man many years younger. As the two were on the point of starting on a prospecting trip into the gold-hills, we decided to follow them, assured by the reputation of the old man that gold would almost surely be found, and that our initial venture would pay us, could we succeed in jumping their claim or even in robbing them of the contents of the 'pockets' they might find and empty."

"These prospectors, it is almost needless to say, were Old Missouri and Randolph Coleridge—your father and your husband."

"Straight as a bee flies, almost, over the mountains and through the wilderness they made their way—straight to the present site

of Big Ledge, where, true to the unerring instinct of the old man, a pay-streak was uncovered."

"Patiently we waited to assure ourselves as to the extent of the find ere striking, lurking in the surrounding hills and keeping the venturesome pair under surveillance night and day until nearly a month had rolled round."

"Then, one morning just at daybreak, Old Missouri left the camp to return to Boise City, leaving Coleridge behind to guard the new-found treasure. That decided the matter so far as we were concerned, for we knew then that it had been no mere 'pocket' or 'sport' they had uncovered, but a paying vein, and we hastened to act."

"Billy Briggs and Si Haydock were hurried after the old prospector, with instructions to make short and sure work of him, while Bartol, Indian Pete and myself were to dispose of Coleridge."

"Neither party made a success of the part assigned them. Old Missouri was overtaken and stabbed, but in the struggle fell over a cliff, and it so came about that the letters he carried were afterward received by you, for it was a difficult place to descend, and, feeling sure that their victim had perished, Briggs and Haydock returned to camp without going down to rifle his pockets. That he really did meet his death at their hands, however, has never been disputed."

A choking sob burst from the lips of the hapless woman, and her head sunk upon her breast in an agony of grief.

"Pardon me for the pain I inflict," uttered Crocker, hoarsely. "I came to reveal all, and to make my task complete no point must be overlooked."

"Go on!" Captain Kate returned, resolutely repressing her grief and again meeting the Titan's gaze with a steely glitter in her magnetic eyes. "I have borne much—will bear more!"

Nodding curtly, the man in white continued:

"With Coleridge, the case was different, for he detected our approach and ordered us to halt, but was shot and badly wounded by Bartol, who was in favor of finishing the job then and there; but the fellow was a man of wonderful nerve, and that fact, rather than any innate reluctance to shed blood, won Indian Pete and myself to urge that he be given at most a chance for his life, with the result that we finally prevailed upon the others to shut him in a cave near by until we could decide as to the best course to pursue with him."

"Then Haydock slipped in with Pete and myself, giving us the majority and we decided the fellow should be kept a certain time, and then be given the alternative of joining our band or being shot."

"So the months rolled by with Coleridge a close prisoner, until the middle of December. At that time a heavy snow fell and for weeks we were shut off from the cavern, so that the conclusion forced itself upon us that our captive would no longer trouble us, as mortal man could not withstand the cold and hunger of those lingering weeks, so long and trying even to the members of the band, comfortably housed and fed as they were."

"With the break in the snow, we beat our way up to the cavern. It was closed, and just as we had left it, but the captive was gone!"

"Not a trace of him remained!"

"He had escaped?" asked Captain Kate, leaning forward in breathless interest.

The Titan gravely shook his head.

"I know not," he replied. "The cavern was a mere hole in the rock, without a fissure above, below, or in the walls. The fastenings at the entrance had not been disturbed, but Coleridge was gone. Yet, had he escaped in his enfeebled condition, without help, he could never have made his way to a place of safety. And from that day to this, not one of the band has ever heard a word from any source to indicate that he is alive, although they have lived in constant dread that he would some day return."

"Of course, his mysterious disappearance brought suspicion upon Indian Pete and myself, and although we both entered a vigorous denial it was many months before we were again free to go and come without one of the others dogging our steps, and it was

in part through this suspicion that Indian Pete finally met his death.

"We were nearly two years getting the first of the mines, the Golden Horn, into operation, owing to a lack of funds, for we had to take to the road and hold up stages to get the money, and that, as you may know, is sometimes a mighty slow and a mighty risky way to raise a pile."

The woman merely nodded, and Dandy Jim, clearing his throat, went on:

"But as soon as we had gotten enough together, we bought and put in the necessary machinery, and then the camp of Big Ledge began to boom."

"About this time there appeared in camp a stranger—a slender, beardless young fellow, who caused us a world of uneasiness, for he had registered at Riata's Ranch under the name of Delmonte Coleridge."

"*Delmonte Coleridge!*" ejaculated Captain Kate, in no little agitation.

"Yes, *Delmonte Coleridge*," the Titan averred. "And as he manifested no little curiosity as to the camp and its founders, we straightway jumped to the conclusion that he and the man who had so mysteriously escaped us were brothers—a conclusion which later events have proved was the correct one."

A low, tremulous sigh fluttered from the lips of the woman, and with a nervous gesture she threw back her veil, disclosing a face strong and handsome, but now of ashy paleness.

"Go on!" she breathed, huskily. "Go on!"

"Well, we talked the matter over, and determined not to molest him unless forced to do so to preserve our secret. We were five against one, and as we could watch him we felt that we really had little to fear."

"Thus, nearly a year went by. Then, with the startling suddenness of a thunder-clap, we discovered that the fellow had gotten into the good graces of Indian Pete and was slowly squeezing the truth out of him."

"That act of treachery settled the red-skin's fate, for within the hour Bartol met him at a lonely spot below the camp, and stabbed him to death."

"But for an accident, that murder would have hastened the very crisis we were striving to avert. In some manner, Bartol had lost his knife, and, fearful that it might be found near the body of the red-skin and thus cause ugly whispers if not direct accusation, he induced me to go with him in search of it."

"As we neared the gulch in which the fatal affair had occurred, we discovered that Indian Pete was yet alive; and more, that Coleridge was with him, listening to the red-skin's dying words."

"In a moment we had hurled ourselves upon the youth, and when we had disarmed and bound him we attempted to force from his lips the words uttered by Indian Pete—tried it even unto torturing him, and failed!"

"But why dwell upon the matter? I grow sick and faint even yet when it comes back to me! Let it answer that, maddened by our ill-success, we subjected him to the torments of the damned, gloating over his agony with the delight of soulless fiends. Bruised and helpless, he was at last bound upon the back of a wild cayuse and sent adrift in the mountain wilds, with the warning that if he escape with his life and ever ventured back to Big Ledge his end would be swift and sure!"

With a short sharp cry Captain Kate sprang to her feet, her bloodless face working spasmodically, her dark eyes gleaming with the vividness of living coals.

"This to me!" she grated, in a voice low and quivering with pent-up passion. "You inhuman monster!—die!"

Involuntarily, Dandy Jim recoiled a pace; but with a spring as swift and sinuous as that of an enraged tigress the tortured woman flung herself straight at his throat, a knife glittering in her uplifted hand!

thrown slightly back to expose his full white throat, as if courting death at the hands of the woman he professed to love yet had so foully wronged.

"My life is yours—take it!" he uttered, swiftly, swerving not a hair's breadth after that first involuntary recoil. "Better by your hand than mine!"

His passive submission, no less than those hurried words, recalled the senses of the maddened woman even as her knife swept downward to bury itself in the yielding flesh of the Titan. Unstained, the gleaming blade dropped from her nerveless fingers, and with a low cry she shrunk back, then sunk upon the rude stool and buried her face in her hands, while her well-knit form shook and quivered in a passion of grief and terror.

Mutely, Dandy Jim gazed down at the suffering creature, a look of despair in his burning eyes, his strong face twitching with the emotions he vainly strove to conceal. Verily, upon his own head his sins had at last recoiled, with a force as crushing as bitter!

As the moments wore on, the sobs of the woman grew less frequent, less violent. Again was her iron will asserting itself, and as the desperado noted the fact he steeled himself anew for the ordeal before him.

"You may proceed," uttered Captain Kate, at length, in a broken voice, as she lifted her eyes almost appealingly to the face of the Titan. "But if you value your life or mine, bide the foul horror of it all, for I can endure no more!"

Dandy Jim silently inclined his head, hardly daring at that moment to utter a response.

"We had calculated, Bartol and I, that the chances were as good as a thousand to one that Coleridge would never survive that wild ride," he resumed, presently, in a subdued, almost inaudible voice. "And our calculations were correct, too, I firmly believe to this day. At that time the camp was hardly a third its present size, prospectors and hunters were a rarity in the surrounding hills, while hostile red-skins made it extremely hazardous for even an armed squad to venture far from camp; and added to these facts was another and the weightiest of all—the ever-present possibility of the maddened cayuse's dashing headlong over a precipice or crushing out the life of his helpless rider against some tree or boulder."

"Yet, with all the odds against him, *Delmonte Coleridge* escaped!"

"Escaped, you say?" and in a tremor of nervous excitement Captain Kate once more sprang to her feet.

"Yes, though how I know not, for until last night there was not a man of us but rested secure in the belief that he had miserably perished."

"And then—what then?" asked the woman, quickly, a hectic flush relieving the pallor of her face, her magnetic eyes gleaming like stars in her intense anxiety.

"And then the scales were rudely pulled from our eyes. *Delmonte Coleridge* was not only alive, but was in Big Ledge, with his plans laid to bring us to book."

At that abrupt declaration, Captain Kate reeled blindly and would have fallen but for the steadying hand of Dandy Jim.

"Oh, Lord! I thank thee!" she murmured, with clasped hands and streaming eyes. "At last! at last!"

"Lady, be seated, and pardon me if I remind you that time is flying, and that there is yet much to say," the Titan coldly urged. "If not dead, *Delmonte Coleridge* is in peril of his life."

"One question, then you may proceed," the woman returned, shrinking away from the supporting hand.

"Was he the Sport, Dell Daunt?"

"Yes, Dell Daunt, or Dauntless Dell, and we were made aware of his identity by Major Myst, one of his trusted friends," and then in a few terse sentences Dandy Jim narrated all that had been learned from the major during his visit to himself and Bartol the night before.

"Oh, the traitor! oh, the scoundrell!" cried Captain Kate, when the full depths of the major's infamy had been laid bare. "Has he no heart—no conscience?"

"Precious little, I reckon," coolly averred the Titan. "He is keen, bold and unscrupulous; and I warn you fairly, lady, that, backed as he is by the cunning brain of Gabriel Denbar, he is more to be feared than Bartol with all his desperate followers."

"Of the present whereabouts of the Sport, I know nothing; but it is greatly to be feared that Slayback and his men have found him and finished their brutal work."

"Oh, no! no!" Captain Kate exclaimed, in a quick, joyous tone, a light laugh breaking from her lips, an exultant flush appearing in her dark eyes. "They have not found him—they will not find him!"

"It is less than an hour, Colonel Crocker, since Dauntless Dell quitted this cavern, under the guidance of my most trusted agent."

"Then, lady, permit me to urge that you lose no time in joining the Sport. He is a cool, clear-headed man, and guided by the knowledge you can give him, will know exactly how to proceed to avenge his brother's death and reclaim the property."

"And now, there is little more for me to say, as I must hasten back to camp to avert suspicion, and await the end, for I shall not attempt to evade the punishment I so richly merit."

"I have spoken, lady, not through fear—not to sacrifice my pards that I might live, but to make such reparation as I could for a wrong unwittingly done a woman. It is not the first time, perhaps, that I have caused one to suffer, but it is the first time that the fact has been brought directly to my knowledge. Queer, isn't it, that I, a ruffian who would shoot down a man without a scruple or a pang, should shudder at the mere thought of having wronged that man's mother, or wife, or sister? Queer, but true! It's Jim Crocker as he came into the world, and it's Jim Crocker as he'll go out!"

"Lady, *adieu!*"

As the bitter tones of the man in white ceased, he stepped back a pace, turned and with quick, restless strides disappeared in the shadows.

Captain Kate moved forward, as if to call him back, then hesitated.

"No, no!" she muttered. "I cannot forgive, even yet!" and with clasped hands and grimly contracted brows the Lady Bandit sunk down upon the stool, to gaze long and earnestly into the smoldering fire.

An hour passed—an hour of hard, intent thought—when she at last rose to her feet and placed a small whistle to her lips.

As the silvery blast died away, two men—slight, athletic fellows, both—came bounding out of the deeper gloom and stopped before her.

"What is it, madame?" the foremost asked, with a respectful bow.

"Work—quick, sharp work for both of you."

"We are ready, madame, and eager," was the prompt response. "Say the word, and we'll at it, for life in this dreary cavern has no charms for us!"

"We are done with the cavern this night, and for all time, I hope."

"Mount, Roger, and ride to the rendezvous. Tell Marshall to move on to Big Ledge without the loss of a moment. I will join him at the ford below."

"We'll not reach there earlier than noon, madame. It is a long, hard ride."

"Noon will do, though the sooner the better. Urge Marshall not to spare his horses."

Saluting, the man turned and hurried away.

"And you, Desmond," continued Captain Kate, addressing her remaining follower, "you, too, have an errand."

"Go to Darrit's retreat and say to him that I desire him and the Sport to return here at once."

"You may expect me back in two hours, madame," and inclining himself profoundly the fellow glided back into the shadows.

Alone once more, the Lady Bandit replenished the fire and sat down to await the return of the second courier.

As the moments wore on, her face grew bright and eager, and she started at every sound.

"Can it end in disappointment?" she murmured, nervously clasping and unclasping her trembling hands. "Is it another false

CHAPTER XXV.

THE CONFESSION FINISHED,

In the face of his awful peril, Colonel Crocker gamely rallied his courage and stood unmoved, just the trace of, of a wan smile playing over his bearded lips, his head

hope leading me on to the rock of despair, or is it the truth—the glorious truth?"

So, long ere the two hours had elapsed, the woman wrought herself into a fever of impatience, and quit her place at the fire, to pace the dry sand in agony of spirit.

Shorter by some minutes than the time set, was the absence of the courier, and as he silently re-entered the cavern and glided into the glimmering firelight, the Lady Bandit read disappointment in his smooth, grave face.

"Well?" she asked, darkly, almost sharply, as the fellow paused before her.

"I was too late, madame. Darrit and his friend had gone."

"Are you sure they had been there?"

"I am positive they had, for I waited to assure myself of the fact."

Captain Kate bowed her head, and her dark brows contracted sharply.

"They have gone to Big Ledge," she exclaimed, after a moment. "Desmond, you must follow them there. Tell them of the steps I have taken, and say that I shall appear in camp shortly after noon with what forced I have raised, as the game is now in my hands."

"And if it is possible, Desmond, have them return here with you at the earliest moment in reason."

Again the courier bowed and departed.

CHAPTER XXVI.

DAUNTLESS DELL FINDS AN ALLY.

"Down, pards, flat upon your faces!" uttered Tom Sawyer, in a low, penetrating voice, as Slayback's sharp command broke that ominous breath of silence. "They're coming now, but hold your fire until I give the word, and then shoot low."

A low murmur ran along the waiting line, telling that the men heard and understood, and under cover of the friendly night all sunk down as charged.

With a swift rush the Vigilantes swept on, till less than seventy yards lay between them and the cabin. Then came a fierce oath and the sound of a heavy fall.

"Look out, pards!" roared a hoarse voice. "The hounds hev stretched a rope across ther path!"

True enough; but that warning came too late, for ere the bellowing voice grew silent fully one-third of the onpressing band had pitched headlong over the simple obstruction, and the ranks of the Vigilantes were in confusion.

"For the last time, Slayback, turn back!" warned Tom Sawyer, coldly, clearly.

"Oh, yas! we'll turn back!" yelled the Vigilante chief, now thoroughly enraged.

"Ready, boys!—fire!"

A heavy volley crashed out, but not a word; not a cry nor an answering shot came from the Regulator line. Around the cabin all was silent as the grave.

"Yip! we done blowed them clean off the face o' ther y'arth!" yelled an excited Vigilante, prancing wildly to and fro. "Done regulated the Regulators like er whirly-gust o' cycloon!"

"Silence, ye fool!" rated Slayback, viciously. "Down, pards! Et's a derned—"

A heavy, steady roar—the crack-crack-crack! of the deadly repeating rifles in the hands of the prostrate Regulators—drowned the voice of the Vigilante chief, and in sudden terror he flung himself at full length on the ground.

"Down! down!" he yelled, frantically. "Down! or they'll murder ther last one o' us!"

The desperadoes needed little urging. Men were falling here and there, groans and screams of pain were becoming alarmingly frequent. Down they went, and in another half-minute not a man was standing.

"Up, pards!—up, and charge them!" rung out the voice of Sawyer, with the clearness of a bugle's peal. "Revolvers first, then knives!"

That sanguinary command completed the work of demoralization. Up from the earth sprung the Vigilantes in utter confusion, to spring away in wild, disordered flight, led, as in their advance, by their valorous chief, Curly Slayback!

A few scattering revolver shots from the victorious Regulators gave impetus to their flight, but beyond that no charge, no pursuit was made.

"It's first blood for us!" cried Sawyer laughing grimly, as he listened to that swift trampling of feet, now growing faint in the distance. "Anybody hurt, pards?"

"Not a man scratched!" was the prompt reply.

"That is good, but we'll not crow till we're out of the woods. They'll try us another fall, by and by. Slayback's got plenty of sand, and he'll not throw up the sponge till he's fairly whipped. Just now he's rattled, but after a bit he'll shake himself together and then look out!"

"Now you're shouting!" Cool Cy averred. "And the odds are about a hundred to one you'll hear from him again before morning."

"It may be pretty fresh in me; an utter stranger, to offer a suggestion, but I reckon I'll have to risk it."

"By all means," urged Sawyer. "And if you're the man I take you to be, I've an idea it'll pay us mighty big to listen."

"You recognize—"

"I recognize your voice, yes," interrupted Sawyer, guardedly. "But let that pass; we'll speak of it later."

"Then the suggestion is in order. It isn't very big, but it may pan out."

"Don't you think two or three good scouts could find out a heap about what these fellows intend to do?"

"Undoubtedly, if we can scare up the scouts."

"Gray Wolf go," volunteered the Crow chief, gliding up.

"An' I reckon I c'd move a peg thet-away!" Royal Godsend declared, with equal promptness.

"There's two, and I'll make the third," announced a young miner near by. "I'm a little new at that kind of business, but as they don't know yet that I'm trainin' with your crowd, I reckon I'll be able to pull through."

"Oh, yes; you can keep in the back-ground," coolly remarked Cy. "My idea is that Slayback's got pretty stiff backing in this little racket he's on, and it'll stand us in hand to know the party putting up the game."

"It's an old saying that to destroy a serpent you should crush its head. And so it is with these Vigilantes; if we wipe out the men directing their movements, we shall destroy their power for harm."

"Hard, horse sense, pard!—every word of it!" wheezed Royal Godsend, with a chuckling little laugh.

"It just is!" Sawyer averred.

"And now, boys, get away with you. You'll find us here when you're ready to report."

Silently the three scouts moved off, in as many directions, and in a moment were lost in the gloom.

"Come with me into the cabin," requested Sawyer, touching the Sport on the arm. "All is quiet now, and it may be our last chance to-night to speak of the matter I referred to a bit ago."

With simply an assenting word, Cool Cy followed the superintendent into the cabin.

"Don't think I am trying to pry into your affairs," continued the latter, as he carefully closed the door, turned up the light and placed a chair at the disposal of his guest.

"That is not my object at all, and it is through no idle curiosity that I speak."

"I know that you are the Sport who was so brutally driven from camp last night, and I know, too, that it must be a powerful motive that impels you to return at this time."

"From words let fall by Jenkins and Gray Wolf, I have gleaned the merest inkling of the truth. You intend to lay claim to one of the mines of Big Ledge, and to obtain possession by force of arms if need be."

"You have hit upon the exact truth," avowed the Sport, calmly. "That is the program, to a dot!"

"It is not an unusual procedure, by any means," remarked Sawyer, reflectively.

"And now we come to the milk in the cocoanut."

"If you feel free to speak, and can show that your claim is a just one, it is not at

all unlikely that you may be able to make a dicker with my men. Though sober, steady fellows and as true as steel, they are out to a man, and if they see that you are in the right they will probably jump at a chance to go in with you."

"Some such idea had suggested itself to me," the Sport admitted, "and I would be pleased to have the thing turn that way."

"It is no ordinary case of claim-jumping that I contemplate, as I can quickly convince you, and no men need hesitate to take up arms in my behalf through fear that I am about to engage in a dishonest or dishonorable transaction."

"In brief, the case is just this:

"The Lone Hunter Mine is my property, duly acquired by discovery and lawful entry. Every dollar that has been spent in its development and improvement has come directly from my pocket, as has also the regular stipulated salary received by Major Myst, who, from the day he first appeared in Big Ledge, has been in my employ."

"The major, I may here remark, is by profession a detective, and he has been here in a dual capacity—as manager of the mine and as a spy upon the actions of certain parties of high repute and standing, whose presence in the camp made it simply impossible for me to appear and claim my own until at least one of two things had come to pass."

"Of these things, the first was the finding of evidence to convict the parties under surveillance of a certain grave crime of which they had been guilty; the second, the advancement of the Lone Hunter to a grade which would give its owners a prestige equal, say, to that enjoyed by Colonel Crocker or Saul Bartol."

"Exactly!" Sawyer exclaimed, with an expressive gleam in his blue eyes. "And if you will pardon the interruption, I will venture to say that Crocker and Bartol were the men."

"Yes, they were," the Sport admitted. "They have cause to fear and to hate me, for they know that if I once succeed in getting a foothold in Big Ledge they will lose not only their ill-gotten property, but with it their lives."

"To resume: having sent Myst here as my trusted agent, I took up the life of a card-sharp in the upper camps, as it was absolutely necessary that I should have money to push the work here, and, broken in health and strength as I was at that time, through inhuman treatment received at the hands of Crocker and his pard, there was no other course left me."

"Though I disliked the life, I tried to play a square game, found luck with me, and won money, and soon came to be known throughout the camp as the Sport from Tip-Top, the High Card, Dauntless Dell, and so on, rarely, if ever, being addressed by the name I had assumed to cover my identity—Dell Daunt."

"Well, as the months went by the major's reports became more and more discouraging, and at last, to retrieve myself from utter ruin, as well as to hasten the real issue, I determined to hazard all, even life itself, on one bold venture."

"So I wrote to two tried and true friends who were cognizant of every feature of the affair, and obtained their help, and they are here now in the persons of Long Pete Jenkins and Gray Wolf, the Crow chief. As soon as I had obtained their answers, I notified Myst to prepare to turn the mine over to me at a certain day, as I would appear here in such a guise and at such an hour to take charge myself."

"Note the result: as I approach the camp I am fired at from ambush, and escape death by the merest accident, Giddy Norton receiving the bullet intended for me."

"Yes, and Myst himself fired that shot!" avowed Sawyer, springing excitedly to his feet. "He was absent from camp all afternoon, and when he returned he carried his hand in a bandage."

"I suspected as much, although he told me the wound was the result of accident happening during a conversation between him and yourself yesterday morning, at the Lone Hunter office, concerning the transfer of the mine," the Sport returned.

"We held no such conversation," Sawyer declared, stoutly. "In fact, he has always affirmed that the mine was his own property,

and frequently expressed a fear that some one would attempt to wrest it from him by unlawful means. It was to guard against just such a danger that the men were all provided with the latest and best make of weapons."

"The infernal hound!" exclaimed the Sport, wrathfully. "He asked me for the money to purchase the weapons, that the men might be in readiness to meet any emergency arising upon my appearance!"

"Oh, I see every crook and turn in his little game now, just as clearly as if he had explained it in so many words!"

"He went down the trail and lay in ambush for the stage, with the deliberate intention of killing me, and compelling the driver to leave my body beside the trail, that he might secure the papers relating to the ownership of the mine."

"Failing in that, he saved me from the mob at Riata's Ranch, fearing that the papers would fall into the hands of Crocker and Bartol. Later on he attempted to drug and rob me; then, secure in the belief that he at last held the papers, went squarely over to the enemy, and through his knowledge of their crimes, compelled them to put up the job that exiled me from the camp."

"Nor is that the extent of his villainy, for he attempted to ambush Jenkins on the trail of Gray Wolf Camp, and naught but a timely warning from Whisky Bill, and later from Captain Kate, saved the life of that brave old man."

"From first to last the cunning scoundrel has played me false, for the Lone Hunter is by far the richest mine in the camp, and for months past he has held all the evidence to convict Crocker and Bartol, and their allies, of murder."

"Now let him beware! Ere the sun goes down on another day, he shall pay for his perfidy, and pay to the uttermost farthing!"

And with eyes gleaming like lurid coals, the Sport sprang to his feet and paced the cabin floor in a fever of righteous wrath.

"Well, pardner, I reckon you can count on Tom Sawyer," the blond Hercules remarked, rising and extending his hand. "I never jump into a game like this till I know whether it's right or wrong, but when I am there, I'm there to stay."

"Thank you, Sawyer. You shall have no cause to regret it," Daunt earnestly returned, as he grasped the proffered hand. "And if you demand absolute proof of my claim, you shall have it at the proper moment."

"But your men—can we count on them?"

"To the last one!" was the confident response.

"And now, pardner, if you'll take a fool's advice, you'll jump right into the Lone Hunter to-night. I have been superintendent of the mine, but was discharged this morning, and in consequence all the men quit, so that the place is now unguarded and unprotected, unless men have been sent there during the past hour."

"The hermit and his daughter are now there, under the protection of Jenkins and five men, and since nightfall we have taken provisions enough into the mine to last the crowd of us, nearly a week, as we had determined to make our stand in behalf of the hermit right there."

"The place is strongly fortified, and if you once get possession with an armed force, nothing short of artillery can drive you out."

The Sport listened intently, and a determined look flashed from his eyes.

"You have said it, Sawyer!" he cried. "That mine is the key to the situation, and so soon as the scouts come in we'll fall back and take possession. Then let—"

A short, sharp cry filled the hiatus. Then came a blinding flash, accompanied with a heavy explosion, which hurled the four walls of the

to a chaotic heap!

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CONSPIRATORS' LAST PLOT.

CHAGRINED and humiliated, Slayback halted when he had put a safe distance between himself and the Regulators, and sharply called his struggling followers to order.

"Et's no use ter run!" he cried, his disagreeable voice taking on a snapping, snarling tone. "They'll not come after us! But

we're whipped, mind ye!—whipped fair an' square, an' all becase we jumped inter et with our eyes shet!"

"We kem out with 'em open, all right!" grimly chuckled a burly ruffian hard by. "Tell ye w'ot et wus, boss—'t wus thet berdered kid's game 'ith ther rope thet floored us!"

"Hold yer jaw!" ordered Slayback, angrily. "Et's jest es I said, we jumped in with our eyes shet, an' we got ther wu'st of et! We're goin' back, by an' by, an' wipe Sawyer an' his keetle gang off o' ther face o' ther earth; an' ter make a cinch of et, I'm goin' ter find w'ot hes happened in this hyer camp sense we've bin gone, an' jest git ther lay o' ther land generally."

"An' what'll we do, boss?" ventured one of the men.

"Stay right whar ye are, critter, an' same 'ith ev'ry mother's son o' ye! Thar's no grub nor no drink this night till we've settled up 'ith Tommy Sawyer—tell ye thet!"

And with that the "Vigilantes" had to rest content. They had sworn to obey their leader, and each one knew that the slightest infraction of one of the rules laid down by him would bring with it punishment swift and sure.

With that last harshly-uttered word, Slayback strode away in the direction of Riata's Ranch, quitting the street as he neared the building and circling around to enter at the rear door, which he unlocked with a key he took from his pocket.

Softly stepping into the hallway, he closed and unlocked the door, then stealthily ascended to the second floor, where he at once sought the room occupied by Saul Bartol and Dandy Jim.

A cautious tap brought a summons to enter, and the desperado stepped into the room.

Seated at the table were Saul Bartol, Major Myst and Riata Joe.

"Hello! hello! It's Slayback himself!" Bartol exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"And how went the battle, Curly?"

"Dead ag'in' us," the Vigilante returned, with a crestfallen air.

"Eh?—you were whipped, you say?"

"Yas!" snapped the ruffian, with a recurrence of his snarling tone. "Whipped like a pabble of raw schoolboys!"

Mutely, the three plotters looked at each other.

"And the woman, Captain Kate, did you secure her?" asked Bartol, after a moment.

"Secure nothin'! She's slyer'n any fox in ther hills!"

"Nor the Sport?"

"Nor ther Sport!"

"I tell you, Coleridge is here in camp!" put in Major Myst, savagely, in a voice made sniffling and indistinct by his broken nose. "Kill Cool Cy, and you'll kill Coleridge!"

"Then who's the sport with him—the flashy galoot?"

"I don't know—one of the gang he's bringing in upon us, curse him!"

Slayback helped himself to a drink of whisky.

"Whar's Dandy Jim?" he inquired, looking at the three men suspiciously.

Bartol slowly shook his head.

"I don't know. He's been missing all day, and his absence bothers me. I do not understand it."

"I do!" and a cunning look crossed the face of the ruffian. "When Dandy Jim shows up ag'in—ef he ever does show up—ye want ter watch him! Mind thet!"

The three men returned his look of suspicion, and then Riata growled:

"Bah! Ther liquor's gone ter yer head, man! Dandy Jim's as true as steel!"

"You say so—you think so, but I know diff'rent!" was the swift retort. "Jest listen a minute, an' you'll change yer mind, I reckon!"

"We all knows Dandy Jim worshiped ther ground Kate Cherry walked on, an' we all knows now thet Kate Cherry an' Captain Kate are the same critter. Last night we decided she'd hev ter go under, an' this mornin' Jim's missin', with never a word to anybody thet he's goin'! Hey! don't et look bad?"

"With many a man it would look bad, yes!" Bartol admitted, reluctantly. "But when the colonel shows up he'll square himself mighty quick!"

"Ef he ever does show up!" mocked Slayback. "He's nosin' 'round ter find thet woman, an' ef he does find her he'll go clear back on ther gang!"

"My men saw him twice ter-day, skulkin' in ther hills, an' both times he dodged out o' sight when hailed. Cain't tell me—ther big cuss is goin' ter double-bank us!"

For the first time a suspicion that Slayback had hit upon the truth entered the minds of the three men, and Bartol uttered a startled oath.

"True or untrue, he's away now, but when he comes back we'll settle the matter mighty quick!" he cried, his eyes blazing with a terrible light.

"And now, pards, we've got a hard nut to crack, and we'd better get at it, for if we don't make haste Sawyer will get the hermit and the girl entirely beyond our reach."

"Now ye're shoutin'!" asseverated Slayback, viciously. "Et's a tough nut, an' thet's why I'm hyar, fer I wants ter know w'ot's bin goin' on in this hyar blessed camp ter-day. No more blind man's game fer me—nary!"

Inwardly cursing at the delay, Bartol briefly outlined the events of the day.

"Wall wall! ef 'tain't a purty kittle o' fish you are all in!" the Vigilante exclaimed, when the last word had been said. "Denbar dead, Bruiser Bill an' Burgess clean laid up, an' the major hyar skint o' his cash an' no good fer a fight!"

"Pards, ef 'tain't a straight streak o' bad luck I never see'd one, an' fer a Gospil fact I feel like throwin' up my hand an' quittin' ther game!"

"Oh, no! ye don't want ter do thet!" Riata protested. "Luck hes run dead ag'in' us so far, but et may turn the next card out o' ther box."

"I fer one am in favor of makin' a good, stiff fight, win or lose!"

"It's the only thing we can do!" averred Bartol.

"We cain't throw up our hands, fer ef we do we've got our medicine ter take anyhow an' nothin' ter gain," the landlord continued. "Now, I've got a keetle idear workin' in my head, an' I'll purreed ter lucidate et."

"Ter begin with, I'll jest say ther major's right about ther Sport, fer et's Coleridge ag'in, an' no mistake, an' his bein' hyar shows we've got a dead game 'un ter buck ag'in', fer no common critter'd stand up under thet back o' his."

"Now, right hyar's ther pint: Coleridge is hyar, an' he kin muster three pards thet we know of—the old ranger, the red-skin, an' ther fat sport; four in all, an' all good men, but not good enough to buck ag'in' ther hull camp. No, siree! Ter make a winnin' fight they'll hev ter hev 'help an' plenty of et; so w'ot's more nateral than fer them ter jine hands with Sawyer an' his gang? See?"

"And that is exactly the move they will make!" asserted Myst, ruefully.

"Et's jest possible ther move I want ter see 'em make!" Slayback declared, with a return of his swaggering, blustering air. "Let 'em all git tergether, say I, an' then we've got a chance ter win. Et's this hangin' away at a keetle handful o' thet hyar an' thet thet worries ther life out of a man."

"Oh, yes; it is all very well for them to get together, if we can force a square fight out of them," Bartol remarked. "But suppose they jump the Lone Hunter Mine. What then? How will we drive them from behind the stockade?"

"Starve 'em out," cried the Vigilante. "An' I reckon a few days with nothin' ter eat nor nothin' ter drink won't help 'em inter a fightin' trim very fast."

"Thar's a quicker way than thet, an' et's a part o' my idear, too," put in Riata, impatiently. "Et's war ter ther knife now, an' ther harder we crowd our game, ther better our show ter win."

"As nigh as I kin kalkilate, ther head cusses o' ther gang are jest about holdin' a confab at Sawyer's cabin now, an' I reckon ef we kin wipe them out, ther trouble's at an end."

"I've got a round dozen bombs downstairs, filled with percussion caps, an' I'll jest slip down ter ther cabin an' chuck one right inter ther middle o' ther head devils. If they live arter thet, they're made o' more'n bone an' flesh!"

Hardened and desperate as they were, this fiendish proposition threw a chill over the little group of conspirators.

"I don't like the ideal!" Bartol exclaimed, with a shudder. "The knife or revolver, I don't mind; but to send death to a man in that way— It is too horrible to think of! We'll try something else!"

"I don't know! Strikes me it would work tip-top!" Slayback declared, after a moment.

"Yes! yes! if it can be done without injuring the girl!" cried Myst, eagerly. "It's the leaders we want to dispose of, for with them out of the way we can bring the men around easy enough."

"Then it's a go!" the landlord asserted, a malignant smile crossing his brutal face. "We're three ter one, an' thet orter settle et, eh, Bartol?"

"I'll waive the scruple, Riata; go ahead."

"Ye'll hear et crack this side o' five minutes, boss, ef I ketch the critters the way I want 'em!" the ruffian cried, stepping toward the door.

"Tell ye w'at, though, Curly, ye'd better hev Bartol go down an' help Haydoc hold the boys steady, while ye make a quick sneak down an' see ef all's straight at the mine. We want ter know jest how the land lays, fer once the bomb cracks, we want ter kerry things with a rush."

"There's sense in that," Bartol observed, rising to quit the room.

"Major, if Crocker comes in while we're gone, show no sign of suspicion."

Myst nodded and again uttered his caution against harming the girl, and then the three desperadoes departed.

For some minutes the major remained at the table, his face gleaming white and ghastly in the flashing light of the candle, his single eye aglow with devilish expectation, then rose and began to pace restlessly about the room.

Five—ten minutes passed thus, then a heavy, booming report jarred the building.

"It is done!" the wretch exclaimed, in a jubilant tone. "It is done, and Coleridge's power is forever broken!"

At that instant the door was flung wide open, and Royal Godsend stepped briskly into the room, cocked revolver in hand.

"Throw up your hands!" ordered the corpulent sport, in a stern voice, as he promptly covered the astounded major.

"Who—who are you?" was the flattering response.

"Me critter? Why, I'm Royal Godsend, t'otherwise Whisky Bill, t'otherwise B. D.—which same stands fer Bolly Darrit, the inwincible an' invulnerable detective! D'ye ketch, critter? That's me, an' if anybody asks ye what ye're took fer, tell 'em murder!"

And advancing with rapid strides, the old detective disarmed and handcuffed the terrified culprit, then forced him out of the room and down the rear stairway.

The lower hallway was filled with dense smoke.

"The ranch is afire," explained Darrit, as he coolly unlocked the rear door with a skeleton key. "I disklivered the fact as I went up. Now, don't ye chirrup! I've got a cocked revolver in my hand, an' et thet fu'st sound off goes thet top o' yer head!"

Limp and helpless in the hands of his captor, Myst permitted himself to be hurried away through the darkness in utter silence.

On descending to the lower floor, Riata had let Bartol and Slayback out the back door; then hurried through the dark and deserted card-room, when he struck a match and lighted a small hand lamp.

Under the bar stood a plain, oblong pine box, and as he placed the lamp on the floor the landlord cautiously raised the lid.

At first glance, the box seemed filled simply with cotton waste, but when Riata had removed and flung aside a few handfuls of that material, a round metallic object the size of a man's fist lay revealed.

"Aha! thet's thet leetle joker!" Riata exclaimed, carefully lifting the bomb from the box and glancing at the nipple and cap with which it was fitted. "Et'd tear an awfu' hole in thet quartz ledge, but I reckon thet's enough without et. Anyway, she's got ter go!"

Replacing the lid, the desperado rose and

extinguished the lamp, and hurriedly left the saloon.

A single backward glance would have detected a faint, fiery glow behind the bar, for the first handful of waste thrown from the box had fallen directly upon the blazing end of the match so carelessly dropped to the floor.

But Riata's mind was completely enwrapped in his devilish scheme, and the one thought pressing upon him was how best to accomplish it. Silently slipping out of the building, he sped swiftly toward Sawyer's cabin, laying his course through the densest shadows, and making a considerable detour that he might avoid the Regulators and approach the cabin from the rear.

No obstacle rose in the way of the soulless wretch, and in an incredibly short time he had gained the coveted position. A single swift glance through the window—a sharp cry from within, warning him that his presence had been detected, and Riata sprang back and cast the bomb.

But at the last moment his finger slipped on the smooth surface of the metal, and the deadly missile hurtled—not through the window, as he had intended but squarely against the stone foundation of the cabin!

A vivid flash, a thunderous report, and Riata, mangled and lifeless, was hurled to the ground, the victim of his own devilish plot!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE FACE THAT HAUNTED THE HERMIT.

TOM SAWYER had certainly acted most wisely in sending Letta Hart and her unfortunate father on to the Lone Hunter Mine under the protection of Jenkins and a picked squad.

The mine was situated just south of the mouth of a gulch dividing the massive ledge after which the camp had been named, and a stout stockade inclosed the half score buildings and miners' cabins belonging to the mine.

Through motives best known to himself, Major Myst had caused this stockade to be built. It was plentifully supplied with loopholes, guarding every avenue of approach, and it had been frequently remarked that not one of the surrounding heights commanded the extensive inclosure.

Here, then, a mere handful of men, properly armed and supplied with food and water, might hold a small army at bay.

Sawyer himself had conducted the party there, turned over to Jenkins the key to main gate of the stockade, and pointed out a cabin where Letta and her father might make themselves comfortable pending the settlement of the trouble.

Then the ranger and the ex-superintendent had drawn aside for a brief conference, after which the latter returned to his waiting followers, while Jenkins took charge at the mine.

That the task before him was not a light one, Long Pete well knew, although there was little danger to be apprehended in case the Regulators succeeded in holding the Vigilantes in check.

But every foot of the long stockade must be patrolled to guard against spies or invaders scaling the wall, while a man must be kept on duty at the main gate, and with the limited force at his command the old ranger felt that he would have his hands full.

Assigning the sentries to their respective beats, Long Pete conducted the hermit and his daughter to the cabin set apart for their use, where they arrived just as the voices of Sawyer and Slayback rung out in the distance in hail and counterhail.

"I must leave ye hyar, hermit, an' you, Miss Letta," the ranger announced, pausing at the door. "Keep quiet, an' don't be oneasy. If I see they're too many fer us an' are goin' ter drive us out, I'll see thet ye both get away in good time."

Letta briefly thanked the old man, and he hurried back to the gate.

The girl then hunted up and lighted a candle, and carefully put away the oil skin package she carried, while the hermit began to pace the floor moodily, tugging absently at his straggling gray beard, a troubled, brooding look in his dark eyes.

"Sit down, father," urged Letta, placing

a chair at the table. "You are tired and worn, and you need rest. I'll see if I can find you something to eat."

"No, no! 'tain't thet, pet! I'm jist bothered—thet's all. Gabe Denbar went square back on his bargain ter-day, an' we're jest five thousan' dollars poorer then we'd orter be. Cuss him fer a shark, anyway!"

"Well, never mind, father, we've money—Hark!"

The roar of rifles at no great distance had interrupted the girl.

The battle between the Regulators and the Invincibles had opened.

"What's thet?" asked the hermit, excitedly.

"It is Mr. Sawyer driving back the ruffians who had plotted to kill you, father. Rest easy; you have friends who will not see you harmed."

"They are fightin' fer me—ter protect me, you say?"

"Yes, father, they are fighting to protect you."

"Kind heavens! Girl, give me your weapons!" and the voice of the hermit, changing as if by magic, rung out clear and shrill. "Fighting for me, and I cowering here like a whipped hound in its kennel. They don't know Old—Old—"

His voice faltered, then failed, and with a low, moaning cry Hermit Hart reeled back, a look of agony on his face, one hand sharply pressing his forehead.

"Ah! et's thet spot—thet cussed spot! Seel et grows bigger an' blacker, an'— Yas—yas! by heavens! thet's thet face!" he muttered, hoarsely, cowering back. "Off, ye tantalizing devil!"

"What face, father?" asked Letta, anxiously, as she softly laid her hands upon his shoulders. "What face?"

The hermit looked at her with an air of bewilderment.

"Why, don't ye know?" he exclaimed. "The face o' thet man who made me what I am—who stabbed me in the back an' then threw me over— Did he throw me over?"

"I don't know, father. Perhaps the Indian, Gray Wolf, could tell you."

"No! He nursed me once when I was sick—that's all. He don't know—I asked him."

"What is my name, Letta?"

"George Rinehart, father."

"Rinehart, eh? Wal, mebbe 'tis!" and a look of cunning crept into his weather-beaten face. "But my other name, Letta? I have two, ye know!"

The girl shook her head in a puzzled way.

"I cannot tell you, father. I never heard it," she replied.

"I wish my pard would come back!" moodily, dreamily. "He'd know—he'd tell!"

Then, with that startling abruptness at times peculiar to him, the old mountain-man turned from the dim and murky past to the present. A look of suspicion crossed his face, and he peered sharply, keenly at his daughter.

"What ye doin' hyar, pet? Didn't I leave ye at thet cabin?" he demanded. "Don't ye know ye ought never ter come hyar alone? Et's a wolf's den—an' wuss!"

Letta briefly explained. The hermit listened attentively, and when he had learned the truth a weary sign broke from his lips.

"We can't go back thet!" he muttered, wringing his hands. "Will we ever have a home, Letta, whar thet hounds can't find us, d'ye reckon? 'Pears 'scf we're clean out o' luck!"

"But thet money, gal!—ther money! Did ye fetch et?"

"Yes, father; the money is here."

"Good! Take care of et, gal! Now 'at Gabe Denbar's cheated me, we can't afford ter lose a cent!"

At that moment a thunderous crash awoke the echoes of the night, and with a startled cry the hermit sprang out of the cabin.

"Don't go, father! Come back!" cried Letta, in a tone of entreaty.

"Jest a minute, pet! I'm afeard them hounds hev a cannon. I'll go ter Jenkins an' see."

Straight to the main gate of the stockade sped the hermit, while Letta caught up her hat and silently followed, fearful that her father might blindly run into danger, yet not daring to make her presence known, as she dreaded arousing his anger.

The gate was open, but just outside Hart encountered Long Pete.

"What was et—a cannon?" asked the hermit, shrilly.

"No; I don't know what et war," Jenkins returned, anxiously. "But I'm afeard something's happened our friends."

"Keep watch hyar at the gate, hermit, till I slips that a-way a bit an' sees what I kin diskiver. Ef any one comes, or thar's any danger, jump inside an' bar ther gate."

Hardly waiting to catch Hart's muttered response, the ranger hurried away through the darkness.

For some minutes the hermit crouched close to the ground in the gateway, listening intently to the distant turmoil; then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he narrowly surveyed the broken expanse before him.

There was nothing to be seen to awaken alarm, yet he changed his position and shivered with a sort of nervous dread.

"Et's cur'us—cur'us!" he muttered, and sinking closer to the ground he again peered sharply at his surroundings.

This time, a dim, indistinct shape, rising but a trifle above the surface, met his gaze and held it.

"Stone or wood, brush or dirt—which?" he mused. "Queer, but I didn't notice et before. Mebbe et's a man, or—yas, thet's et—ther black spot! See! et grows bigger an' bigger—comes nearer!"

Now trembling violently, the hermit gazed at the creeping, crawling object like one fascinated. One minute—two, and then, but for that fatal hallucination, Hermit Hart would have recognized in that stealthily approaching object a man, and that man an enemy!

"Yas! yas! et's ther spot, an' et'll fetch with et ther face—ther cruel, devilish face! Ef I c'd git et by ther throat! Aha!"

Even as that thought struggled through the reeling brain of the hermit, the creeping spy paused, not five feet away, startled by that form cowering just before him in the dense shadow of the gateway.

Just a breath of hesitation on the part of each, then forward they leaped—the hermit to clutch madly at the face of his vision, the spy to silence the man guarding the stockade gate.

So in silence the two men grappled, the hermit by the merest chance striking the knife from his adversary's hand, just as a wild cry of affright rung from the lips of Letta Hart.

That cry served a two-fold purpose: it dispelled the hermit's illusion and brought the guards to the gate.

"I've got ther critter!" harshly uttered Hart, as with a mighty effort he hurled the spy to the ground and flung himself upon him. "Hyar, you fellows!—quick!"

The guards needed little urging; but Jenkins was the first to reach the struggling men, and in another minute the daring intruder was helpless in the grasp of two brawny Regulators.

"Drag him ter ther cabin, yender," ordered Jenkins. "We'll take a look at ther critter."

"Boys, guard the gate closely. Thar's more of his ilk out thar, most likely."

Mutely, three of the men took their stand at the gate, while Jenkins and the others hurried the captured spy toward the cabin, closely followed by Letta and her father.

At the door, the fellow made a desperate effort to break away, but was hurled headlong into the cabin, where again he faced his captors like an animal at bay.

Curly Slayback stood revealed!

"I thort so!" grated one of the Regulators, as his gaze fell upon the ugly face of the desperado. "Buckle down, Curly! Ther jig's up!"

No word of reply came from Slayback. With white, tensely drawn face and eyes pale and glaring with terror he stared at Hermit Hart.

"You here—and alive!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "You—"

"The face! the face!" screamed the hermit, returning that look of horror with a glare of deadly hate; and then, with a yell of rage, he sprung straight at the desperado's throat.

But Slayback was not to be caught entirely off his guard. Swift as thought he jerked

a short, heavy pistol from his pocket, leveled it and fired.

The hermit staggered blindly, then fell.

"Take thet, ye sarpiant o' sin!" uttered Jenkins, hoarsely, and with the words the metal-bound butt of his revolver crashed down upon Slayback's head, felling him in a lifeless heap!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE RING.

"ARE ye hurt, pardner?" rung out the strong, clear voice of Tom Sawyer, as the echoes of the explosion died away.

"Nary hurt, but badly shaken up," promptly replied the Sport, blindly groping about in the murky darkness hanging over the ruined cabin. "Where are you?"

"Right here; and here's a hole we can creep out at," and grasping the arm of his friend, Sawyer pulled him forward.

In another minute the two were in the open air, surrounded by the alarmed and anxious Regulators.

"What was it, boss?" cried one, when it had been found that the two men were uninjured. "Powder?"

"Powder or dynamite, I don't know which. But I do know that it was the work of our enemies, for I plainly saw the face of Riata Joe at the window, just before the explosion."

An angry roar followed Sawyer's words, and on every side rose threats of lynching.

"I don't think you'll ever have a chance to rope the miscreant, gentlemen!" Dauntless Dell declared. "The chances are that he's cheated the gallows, as he certainly had no time to get away before the explosion occurred."

That the Sport's view of the case was correct, was attested a moment later by the discovery of Riata's body.

"He's dead, pards—dead as a nail!" announced one of the Regulators, after a brief examination. "He tried ter play et almighty fine, an' hurt no one but hisself, which same serves him exactly right!"

At that juncture, shrill cries of alarm rung through the camp, and then came the shout: "Fire!—fire!—fire!"

"By heavens! it's Riata's Ranch!" ejaculated Sawyer, as a lurid burst of flame disclosed the location of the fire. "Hark! what was that?"

"A pistol-shot at the Lone Hunter!" the sport averred, with glowing eyes. "Come! we'd better hasten on to the mine. Some of the devils may have slipped around to cut us off."

"But the scouts! They—"

"Scouts here!" interpolated Gray Wolf, gliding up, slowly followed by the young miner. "No find out much. Vigilante chief go 'way to talk, Bartol come and take his place."

"Heap big fire at s'loon. Trick, mebbe!"

As the chief ceased speaking, a series of terrific explosions shook the entire camp, completely wrecking the Ranch and the buildings adjoining on each side, while the crackling flames, given fresh impetus, fiercely shot skyward, lighting the rough street from end to end. The fire had reached Riata's bombs.

"Look out! The Vigilantes are comin'!" yelled a hoarse voice.

It was true. Ignorant of the miscarriage of Riata's plot, and careless of the destruction of the Ranch, Bartol was urging the desperadoes forward at a run, with the hope of taking the Regulators by surprise.

"Steady, boys!—steady!" ordered Sawyer, sharply, as a restless swaying of the men betrayed danger of a stampede. "Give the critters a volley, then fall back to the mine at a double-quick!"

Heartily ashamed of their momentary weakness, the Regulators hastily ranged themselves in line, then leveled their guns, aimed and fired with the steadiness and precision of veterans.

"Good!" cried Sawyer, as he saw the Vigilantes waver, then halt. "Now fall back, boys, and we'll have the stockade for shelter."

With a cheer, the men obeyed, and within five minutes were in possession of the Lone Hunter Mine.

The Vigilantes, aided by the glow from the burning buildings, watched this last maneuver from afar, and as the stockade

gate closed gave utterance to a series of angry yells.

"We hold the whip hand now, pards, and it will be many hours before those curs attempt to show their teeth," said Sawyer, grimly. "But in the mean time, be ready for business."

"As I have some business to transact with the gentleman here, I shall have to leave you for a half hour or so. During my absence, Mr. Jenkins will have charge, and you will obey him as you would me."

Then accompanied by Dauntless Dell, the Regulator chief drew aside, to resume the conversation so rudely broken off by Riata's daring exploit.

"The question that I want to discuss just now is the one of apprising the men of the two states of affairs," Sawyer explained, when they had reached a secluded spot. "Had it better be done at once, think you?"

"Yes, at once," the Sport replied. "Let every man know exactly what he is doing. State the case plainly, say that I am here to do the right thing by all, and then let each decide for himself."

"That is my idea of it," Sawyer declared. "And I think you can safely count on every man."

"Hello! here's Godsend!"

"No, it's Darrit, now!" chuckled the detective, stepping forward. "I've been nosin' around after our frisky friend, Mr. Daunt, here. I want him to go over an' take a look at a couple o' critters I've got caged in one o' the cabins. You'd better walk along, cap'n; they're well wuth seein'."

"Oh, if there's a show, I'm in it," Sawyer declared, and then the three walked across to the cabin adjoining the one given over to the hermit and his daughter.

A candle was burning on the table; and as the trio stepped into the room the detective pointed into a dimly lighted corner.

There, under guard of an armed Regulator, and with wrists and ankles securely pinioned, lay Curly Slayback and Major Myst!

No word, of exultation passed the lips of Dauntless Dell, but that he fully appreciated the situation was evidenced by his flashing eyes.

Sawyer, taking his cue from the Sport, likewise remained silent, and after a moment's scrutiny the three stepped back to the door.

"Now I'll be off and see the men," said the Regulator chief. "I congratulate you in advance, Daunt, for the fact that Slayback and the major are here and prisoners in the hands of a detective will carry with it no little weight."

"I certainly wish you luck, Sawyer," Dauntless Dell returned. "We will join you presently."

"Reckon you'll make out now, pardner!" chuckled Darrit, when they were alone. "A heap different from last night, ain't it, eh?"

"Don't mention it!" the Sport exclaimed with eyes aglow. "It's mighty fine salve for a sore back!"

"But where did you get the scoundrel, Darrit?"

"I took the major at Riata's Ranch. As for Slayback, he came spyin' round the stockade an' was gobbled up by Jenkins an' the hermit, who brung him to the cabin over thar, whar the reptile broke loose an' glanced a bullet off o' the hermit's bump o' recollection, an' then went down with a whack over the skull that 'd 'a' killed a decent critter."

"Was the hermit hurt?"

"Knocked clean silly, but he'll pull 'round all right ef I don't miss my guess."

The Sport uttered a long breath of relief.

"I am glad to hear that it is not dangerous," he remarked. "I heard the shot, and feared some of the devils had succeeded in slipping in."

"Shake, Darrit! For the first time in years I see my way clear, and I owe it to my friends—to yourself and my secret pard, Captain Kate!"

The two men exchanged a hearty hand-clasp.

"And that reminds me of the Lady Bandid's ring," Dauntless Dell continued. "I will put it on and wear it, for according to her promise he will then join me here. Victory is near, and of all my friends she should be the one to share in my triumph!"

"She'll come, no doubt," returned the detective. "Even here, you are now watchin' her."

by her agents, and when the ring appears upon your hand word will be carried to her as quickly as mortal man can go."

The Sport slipped the ring upon his finger, then stepped to the table and held his hand where the candle light shone full upon it.

"It's an odd trinket!" he exclaimed, admiringly. "I—where—"

His voice failed him. His face grew deathly pale, and he trembled violently.

So palpable was his agitation that Darrit could not help noticing it. A perplexed look came over the face of the cunning detective, and presently his look faded and gave place to an expression of subdued exultation.

"I kin jest see it!" he mused, softly rubbing one hand over the other. "Jest a glimpse o' light ahead, an'— Yes, I'll try it!"

With a masterful effort, Dauntless Dell had succeeded in controlling his emotions, and he now approached the detective.

"Darrit!" he exclaimed, coldly, almost harshly, "I must know something more of this woman—this mysterious Captain Kate, and of her mission here!"

"Believe me, it is through no idle curiosity that I ask. I must—"

"Jehosephat! look at that!" interrupted Darrit, pointing to a sudden burst of flames beyond the stockade. "The fire is spreadin'—it'll take the camp!"

"It should wipe the accursed spot out of existence!" bitterly.

"Now tell me, Darrit—quickly!"

"All I can—yes! But I'd better tell you what I think, fu'st!"

"Say it!"

The detective looked the Sport squarely in the eye, then coolly replied:

"I think the woman's your wife, man! That's all!"

CHAPTER XXX.

DAUNTLESS DELL'S DEFIANCE.

A SHORT, inarticulate cry burst from the lips of the Sport, and he drew himself sharply together, as if to spring straight at the throat of the smiling detective.

"Say that again! If—"

"I'll say nothin', pardner, if *you* say so!" broke in Darrit. "You asked, an' I spoke my mind!"

"It's a cruel jest! My wife's dead—been dead for years!" returned the Sport, bitterly.

The detective nodded, then, as hasty steps sounded outside the door, checked the words he was about to utter.

"I'll see you ag'in, pardner," he said simply, and then Tom Sawyer sprung into the cabin.

"You're wanted, Daunt, immediately," the miner announced. "The boys are with you to a man, and you have been elected to head your own fight."

"Bartol has come up under cover of a white flag, and I reckon you'd better go out and see the critter."

"I'll go, certainly; but not as I am now. Wait!" and with a few deft movements Dauntless Dell removed and cast aside the cunningly arranged beard; and then a wig: disclosing to the startled gaze of his friends, not the handsome features of Dell Daunt, the Sport, but the head and face of an utter stranger!

"Puzzled, pards?" he laughed, grimly. "I was disguised last night, and doubly disguised to-night. Now you see me as I am."

A howl of terror came from the corner, and Slayback turned his face to the wall.

"Oh, Lawd! oh, Lawd! I passes now, fer I is booked fer ther rope fer sure!" he groaned.

"That you are, you heartless devil!" was the swift response from the Sport.

"Guard him closely, my man, and you'll never grumble at the pay for this night's work!"

"Ketch him gittin' away!" returned the Regulator, with a significant flourish of his revolver.

Accompanied by Darrit and Sawyer, the Sport then quitted the cabin and hastened to join the men at the gate.

"Pards, your new chief—not as you have seen him, but as he is!" and with that terse introduction and explanation Sawyer stepped aside, giving place to Dauntless Dell.

A murmur of surprise rose from the men, for they had expected to find their new leader Cool Cy, the Sport; but the stern white face and flashing eyes so clearly disclosed by the glow of the distant fire were quick to command their respect, and in the breath of silence following that first involuntary outburst, a full, powerful voice exclaimed:

"A man o' sand, ef looks count, an' tharfore ther man ter lead us!"

"Pards, I moves three cheers fer ther new chief!"

The three cheers were given with a vim, and then Dauntless Dell stepped forward, bowing right and left, and said:

"Gentlemen, you flatter me, for you have given me a welcome that a king might envy!"

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, and pledge myself to merit your confidence unto the end, be that end what it may!"

The clear, incisive tones reawoke the enthusiasm of the crowd, and amid ringing cheers Dauntless Dell made his way through the stockade gate.

Every feature of the broken slope lying between the mine and the camp proper was now distinctly visible, and a single sweeping glance was all-sufficient to apprise the quick-witted Sport of the exact situation.

The Vigilantes, with numbers swelled to nearly a hundred by reinforcements from the men of the Golden Horn and High Horse mines, had approached to within three hundred yards of the stockade, and there ranged themselves in a long, semi-circular line, to await the result of the conference demanded.

A hundred paces in advance of his followers stood Saul Bartol, his errand mutely proclaimed by the white handkerchief fluttering at the end of his gun-barrel.

That one glance at the arrangement of the enemy's forces, then Dauntless Dell strode out from the stockade and paused at a distance equal to that lying between Bartol and his followers.

"Hello, thar!" the Sport hailed, in an easy, confident tone, as he came to a halt. "Are you the spokesman for that crowd back thar?"

"I am their spokesman," Bartol returned. The Sport nodded briskly, then continued.

"And you are here to make terms looking to a surrender?"

"Yes, yes; that is the idea exactly."

"Well, we're not hard men to deal with—we don't ask much. If you fellows will deliver over to us Dandy Jim Crocker, Si Haydoc and that rascally little cut-throat they call Saul Bartol, the rest of the gang may go. They don't amount to much, anyhow."

For a moment Bartol was speechless.

The cool effrontery of the Sport completely unnerved him.

"You're a mighty smart man, you are!" he spluttered, as soon as he could command his vocal organs. "It's a huge joke to put the cart before the horse in that way, isn't it? I've known some mighty good men to die from being too free with just such wit, and I reckon you won't think it's so devilish funny, either, when you feel the rope tighten around your neck!"

"Oh, what's the matter with you?" the Sport retorted, in a tone of mock protest. "Here I've come at your own request and given you the very best terms I could possibly scare up, and what do you do? Fly into a rage, just as if you were an enraged bull and some one had flaunted a red rag in your face!"

"If that's a square deal, I don't know it!"

"Square or not, you'd no right to distort my meaning, or to insult me!" the desperado cried, his voice quivering with rage.

"I'd have you know I am Saul Bartol, and I came here to demand the unconditional surrender of Sawyer and his gang!"

"Why in Tophet couldn't you say so in the start?" demanded the Sport, in an aggrieved way. "It would have saved a heap of fuss and fury."

"But if you're expecting us to surrender, you're barking up the wrong tree entirely!"

"We've a strong force, picked men all, and we've got the ammunition and the grub to withstand a longer siege than you can afford to give us."

"More than that, we've got Curly Slayback, or Billy Briggs, as you used to call him, and we've also got the major."

"See? It's the whip-hand against you now, and when we crack the lash you'll dance!"

"Teeter back to your gang, my brave Bartol, and tell them it's *no*!—that if they want us they must come and take us!"

For a full minute Bartol seemed lost in thought.

"This is a mighty serious matter," he remarked, at length. "You know what it is to jump a claim, and you know the penalty. Sawyer and his man have been led into this thing blindly by that accursed Daunt, as have you yourself, perhaps, and I think that when the matter is put before all in its proper light there will be no further trouble."

"Go back and send Sawyer out."

"Sawyer has nothing to do with the question before us. I am at the head of the game, and if you are acting-chief of the Vigilantes you will settle the question with me!"

"And who the deuce are you?" cried Bartol, his anger breaking out afresh.

In tones that rung like the notes of a bugle came the reply:

"I am Randolph Coleridge!"

Bartol started so violently that the gun slipped from his hands.

"It's a lie!—a lie!" he shouted, hoarsely.

"Oh, no! it's the truth, Saul Bartol!" was the calm retort. "The claim I've jumped to-night is my own, as are the High Horse and the Golden Horn!"

"The death-cave was cheated of its victim, the miner Mazeppa survived his almost mortal injuries, and the luckless Sport exiled by your brutal clan has had the hardihood to return! As the three in one, Saul Bartol, I am here for gold and for revenge!"

Bartol made no reply. His face turned a sickly, yellowish white, his eyes grew cold and glassy, and his head sunk forward until his chin rested upon his wildly-throbbing breast. In a word, his whole aspect was that of a man suddenly stricken dumb with a deadly terror.

A wild burst of cheers from the Regulators and a fierce answering shout from the Vigilantes recalled his reeling senses. Leaving his gun where it had fallen, the wretch turned and like one in a dream walked back to his line.

Dauntless Dell returned to the stockade gate, where he was met by Gray Wolf.

"That was the white snake?" interrogated the chief, in a guarded voice.

"That was the man who killed Indian Pete," the Sport returned, as cautiously, as he produced and handed to the chief a curiously wrought blade. "And there is the knife."

"Good! By and by Gray Wolf avenge him brother," and with these significant words the Crow glided back into the inclosure.

After a brief consultation with Sawyer, the Sport ordered the gate closed and secured, and the guards around the line of the stockade doubled. Then, having empowered Jenkins to make such explanations as were necessary to Sawyer and the men relative to what had passed between himself and Bartol, he hurried away in quest of Darrit.

The startling words uttered by the cunning detective had impressed Dauntless Dell most deeply. The Sport knew that Darrit was no one to trifle with so important a question, and he now determined to press the detective for a full and free explanation.

But in this he was baffled, for the present, at least.

Darrit was not to be found. He was gone, and his evanishment was as complete as it was suspicious.

"He has succeeded in skipping away, and has gone to tell Captain Kate that I wear the ring," was the only explanation that presented itself to the Sport, and with that he was forced to rest content.

Abandoning the search, Dauntless Dell turned to the cabin occupied by the hermit, and his daughter.

"I must see how the old man is progressing," he muttered. "It is strange, but I can't help thinking he is my old pard. He is like him, yet very unlike him. After all, the girl will be the real test, for if she is Nellie's sister I will know her, though years have passed since last I saw her."

Thus musing, he approached the cabin and tapped softly on the door.

It was opened by Letta Hart.

The girl's eyes were red with weeping, and her manner betrayed extreme agitation.

"How is your father?" inquired the Sport, in a kindly tone, while he gazed searchingly at the face of the girl.

"Oh, sir, he is badly hurt—much worse than Mr. Jenkins or Mr. Sawyer seem to think!" the girl replied. "He lies in a stupor from which he rouses only at intervals, and then he is in delirium, and dwells constantly on scenes in the past.

"Will you come in, sir, and see him?"

Dell mutely inclined his head, and entered the cabin.

The wounded man lay on a rude cot in one corner of the room, and as the Sport softly approached he abruptly sat up, saying:

"Yes, yes, gents! I'm Old Missouri, an' I've struck it rich ag'in!"

"A hundred dollars on the ace! An' Mr. Dealer, you may put a copper on the bet on the nine an' heel it to the six. There—that's it. Nine—ace! Aha! I whiprow the turn!"

The Sport smiled sadly. There could no longer exist in his mind, a doubt that the hermit was indeed his lost pard. The old man's assertion that he was Old Missouri sunk into insignificance, as proof of his identity, when compared with that brief vagary of the gaming-table!

Gambling had been the curse of the old prospector's ruined life. To the demon Chance he had yielded fortune after fortune!

"Old Missouri—Old Whiprow, don't you know me?" the Sport asked, laying his hand on the shoulder of the wounded man.

"Look up!"

The hermit obeyed.

"Oh, yas, o' course I know ye, boy," he replied, petulantly, with just glance at the anxious face bending over him. "Don't ax sech foolish questions, pard!"

"An' now let me alone. I want to sleep, sleep! My head is bad!"

With that, he sunk back, and in another minute was sleeping quietly.

"Do you think he will live?" asked Letta, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, he has a big chance for his life," the Sport returned. "And when he does get on his feet again it won't be as Hermit Hart, but George Rinehart, or Old Missouri.

"And now, Miss Letta, there is a question I want to ask you, don't you remember me?"

The girl looked at him a moment, then slowly shook her head.

"You look familiar—you recall some one I have known in the past, but I do not remember you," she declared, simply.

Dauntless Dell smiled sadly, then said:

"I have suffered much and have changed greatly; but I am your own brother, Letta. I am Randolph Coleridge!"

A faint cry escaped the girl. Like a flash, the truth illumined her face, and she sprung forward and warmly grasped the outstretched hand of the Sport.

"You are indeed Randolph!" she exclaimed. "I see it now, and wonder that I did not see it at first.

"But—but they said you were dead?"

"I have been nearer dead than I ever want to be again, little girl. At the time Father Rinehart received his injuries I was wounded and captured by the same men, and shut up in a mountain cave until they could decide what should be my fate. They kept me there for months, and winter would have relieved them of their work had not brave old Pete Jenkins stumbled upon my prison at the beginning of a heavy snow storm. He rescued me, but it was many months before I recovered from my wound and that long and terrible confinement.

"Then in disguise I ventured back here, fell into the hands of the same men, was beaten almost to death, and then lashed upon the back of a wild horse and sent adrift in the mountains. This time Gray Wolf, the Indian, came to my rescue and nursed me back to life.

"But, here I am, Letta, telling my story when other matters are more pressing. What I want to know now is, what do you know of Nellie?"

"Poor Nellie is dead!" was the low-voiced reply. "For something over two years after you and father left Boise City, neither

she nor I heard a word from you. Then one day two letters came, one from you and one from father, accompanied with a brief note written by the postmaster at Gopher Lode, stating that the letters had been found beside the dead body of an old miner up here in the hills by one Hermit Hart.

"Well, these letters and the note produced an attack of brain fever, from which Nellie was slow to rally, and it was almost a year before she was herself again.

"In the mean time, our aunt had died in St. Louis, leaving each of us a comfortable fortune.

"So I went back to school in Virginia, and in less than a fortnight received a letter from Nellie which caused me no little uneasiness, if not downright alarm.

"In effect, the letter asserted the belief that both you and father had been basely murdered, and that she had determined to visit Boise City, and from there with the aid of detectives trace you to the point at which the crime had been committed, and if possible bring your murderers to justice.

"I returned home to try to dissuade her from making any such attempt, but arrived too late, as she had converted all her property into money and started West two days before.

"Then came the report of a steamboat disaster on the Missouri, and as her name appeared in the list of missing I hurried to St. Jo to learn, if possible, her fate.

"So far as my object was concerned, the trip was in vain, for from that day to this I have heard nothing of poor Nellie."

"It was there I lost all trace of her," the Sport remarked, in a subdued voice. "But I have hopes that we shall yet find her alive.

"I may add that it was in St. Jo, too, that you disappeared."

"Yes, at the depot the day I intended to return home I met father," Letta explained. "The recognition was mutual, although we had both changed greatly since our last meeting.

"I saw at once that something was wrong with his brain. He insisted, for example, that his name was Hart, and he could recall but little of the past. As he was growing old, I determined to remain with him, and so came here. I do not wonder that you obtained no further trace of me there, as our departure was secret. Indeed, father is cunning and secretive to a high degree, since his unfortunate experience here."

"It is fortunate that he has become so," declared the Sport. "But for that change in him, both of you would have fallen into the clutches of these human sharks long ago."

At that moment a hubbub outside attracted the Sport's attention, and with a few words he hastily quitted the cabin.

Day was breaking, and by its dim gray light he saw that his men were not a little alarmed.

"What is it now?" he asked of Sawyer, who promptly advanced to meet him.

"We've got to fight fire!" was the cool reply. "Those cusses out there have gotten the running-gears of two wagons, and are building traps to fire the stockade."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BRAVE WOMAN DIES.

"It is you, Darrit?"

"Yes, madame."

"And Desmond?"

"In Big Ledge by this time, madame," the old detective replied. "Coming here, I met him, and sent him on to the camp to keep an eye on matters there, as a dangerous crisis is at hand.

"Is it true that you have sent for Captain Marshall and his men?"

"It is true," the Lady Bandit averred. "Shortly after you and the Sport had quitted the cavern, Colonel Crocker appeared. He was greatly agitated, having discovered my identity, and in a remorseful mood he made full confession of the crime against my husband and my father. Having learned the truth, I could do nothing less than send for Captain Marshall and yourself."

"In doing so, you did well, madame."

"But I am surprised and delighted to hear that Crocker has weakened and con-

fessed, for the way is now open to us, and not a shade of doubt remains to be cleared away.

"When my pard was killed, the important evidence he is known to have secured died with him, so he had not yet imparted it to us, and I greatly feared that his death would prove a disastrous blow to all our plans. But a series of lucky accidents—if I may so call them—beginning with the appearance of Long Pete Jenkins in camp, and culminating with Crocker's confession to-night, have stood us in good stead."

"Yes, yes! I understand that," the woman said, impatient to get to the subject weighing most heavily with her just then.

"Did you leave Mr. Daunt in camp, Darrit?"

"I did, madame; and in that connection, there are two or three matters I wish to discuss with you.

"To shorten a somewhat lengthy story, permit me to say, simply, that there has been serious trouble in Big Ledge during the day and to-night. This trouble is the outcome, in part, of a growing dissatisfaction at the reckless course so long pursued by the Vigilantes; said course consisting, in part, of the burning of your hotel last night, the driving of our friend, Mr. Daunt, from the camp, the furious search to-day made for you, and doings of that sort. The real outburst, however, did not occur until the arrest of Hermit Hart, to-day; for the murder of my pardner yesterday. Then, urged on by the hermit's daughter—a most beautiful young lady I assure you, madame—about thirty of the best men in camp, led by Tom Sawyer, rose in arms and rescued the old man, and secretly conveyed both him and his daughter to the Lone Hunter Mine for safe-keeping.

"As soon as we had discovered just how the land lay, the Sport and myself joined Sawyer's forces; with the result that our friend quickly made terms with the men and is now at the Lone Hunter, holding the Vigilantes at bay."

"Is that all, Darrit?" asked Captain Kate, in a tremulous voice.

The veteran detective gravely shook his head.

"No, madam: it is not all," he replied. "Permit me to congratulate you!"

"My husband?" betraying intense interest now.

"Yes! your secret pard is none other than Randolph Coleridge! I heard him so declare not two hours since!"

A low cry broke from the woman, and tears of joy streamed from her eyes.

"I knew it!—I knew it!" she cried, clasping and unclasping her hands. "He is Del monte Coleridge, for my husband never had a brother!"

"The finding of your husband is not the full extent of your good fortune, madame," continued the detective, after a moment. "I can assure you that your father, though now suffering from a severe wound, is alive; and with him is your missing sister!"

"Father!—Letta!" gasped the Lady Bandit, incredulously, and then, overwhelmed with emotion, she sunk helplessly upon the stool.

"It is all too good to be true!" she exclaimed, between laughter and tears, after a moment. "Alive!—the three I have mourned as dead!"

"But go on, my good Darrit!"

"I hardly know what more to say just now!" chuckled the detective. "And— isn't enough as good as a feast?"

"Ah! no! my good friend—not in this case! Tell me, does—does Randolph know?"

"Well, I gave him a mighty fine hint, but he didn't seem to grasp it. He has mourned you as dead."

"And father, and Letta?"

"They know absolutely nothing. Your father, as I have said, is wounded, and just before leaving the mine I slipped in to see him, as a suspicion was growing upon me that things might turn out so-and-so. And by putting a few questions to your sister, I verified that suspicion mighty quickly."

"My father is *Hermit Hart*?" she asked.

"Exactly! The very old gentleman who proved so obtuse in the hands of poor Gerry and myself when we undertook to question him concerning the finding of the letters.

"The truth is, for five years past the old gentleman has been the victim of an hallu-

cination, induced by injuries received at the hands of Bartol, *et al*, and has all along imagined himself some one else. It is quite likely that when he recovers from his present wound, he will again be in full possession of his senses. At least, I have seen two similar cases result just that way, and from present indications, Mrs. Coleridge, I don't think you need have any great uneasiness.

"There is one other matter I will mention now, and then I must decline to talk any further."

"We have captured two among the leaders of our enemies—Slayback and Major Myst. I have succeeded in squeezing a partial confession out of the major, and I am free to confess, madame, that your attempt to play detective in the dual role of Captain Kate and Kate Cherry was not a brilliant success. The major discovered the truth long ago, and listened regularly to our secret conferences. It was through him that your identity became known."

"I judged as much from Crocker's disclosures," Mrs. Coleridge rejoined. "And yet, I am not sorry that I made the attempt, as good has come of it. And the outlawry of 'Captain Kate' was purely fictitious."

"Purely so, and good did indeed come of it. It saved the life of Long Peter Jenkins, beyond question, and the old ranger has certainly been an important factor in bringing about the present happy condition of things. Moreover it made you the 'secret pard' of your own husband!"

"Yes, yes!" laughed the woman. "I was unconsciously attracted to him from the first."

"But what do you propose to do next, Darrit?"

"I want to put myself in the way of Captain Marshall and his men at the earliest moment possible," was the prompt reply.

"They will reach the ford down on the trail some time near noon. They have orders not to spare their horses, and they may arrive by eleven o'clock."

"Will that be soon enough?" and an anxious strain crept in the woman's voice.

"Oh, yes; there isn't any particular rush. It's just this: the sooner we throw Marshall's force into Big Ledge, the sooner the war will end."

"It is broad day now, and if you have an extra horse, we might mount and ride down to the ford. We can wait there."

"Was Desmond afoot?"

"He was."

"Then you can take his animal. Come!" and with a sigh of relief Mrs. Coleridge led the way to the horses.

Hastily bridling and saddling the animals, the two enveloped themselves in long waterproof cloaks to protect their clothing and their weapons, then led their steeds through the fissure leading down to the cascade, where they mounted and plunged boldly through the sheet of falling water.

The better part of a half-hour had passed ere they reached the break in the banks at which the Lady Bandit usually entered or quitted the stream, and here they rode out upon the stony waste.

"Fifteen minutes will see us at the end of the first stage, in other words the ford," Darrit observed, striking spurs to his horse. "And were Marshall there, twenty minutes more would easily put us in Big Ledge."

There was an undercurrent of anxiety in the detective's voice, but happily for Mrs. Coleridge she failed to notice it, merely nodding and touching her spirited horse with the whip.

Three hundred yards the pair had gone, when suddenly two horsemen burst into view over the crest of a distant knoll.

"Why, that is Rogers!" the woman cried, excitedly. "And—yes, it is Captain Marshall, too!"

"Come, my friend! Quickened your pace, for I am anxious to know the meaning of this!"

The explanation was speedily forthcoming.

As the party met, all drew rein.

"Captain Marshall, I am glad to see you!" exclaimed Mrs. Coleridge, with an eager flush on her beautiful face. "Are your men with you?"

"They are at the ford, madame, I am happy to say," the man replied, gallantly doffing his hat.

"Some four or five hours ago, I became alarmed at a brilliant glow in the direction of Big Ledge, and, fearing trouble there, roused my men and came on, leaving a sentry at the rendezvous to apprise you of my whereabouts in case you should send for me during my absence."

"On our way here, we fell in with Rogers, and I am pleased to know that our action cannot fail to meet with your approval."

"Your promptness and sagacity merit my warmest thanks, Captain Marshall."

"But I believe there is need for haste even yet, and Mr. Darrit will put you in possession of the facts while we all ride on to join your force."

The captain bowed and with Darrit took the lead, and the four set forward at a sharp gallop.

Arrived at the ford, Captain Marshall put himself at the head of his men, some twenty-odd bold, well-armed fellows, and the entire party at once started toward the camp at a brisk pace.

In something less than the time named by Darrit, a point was reached overlooking Big Ledge, and all drew rein.

It was a startling scene that met their gaze.

The central portion of the camp was in ruins, and all business had been suspended.

Down at the Lone Hunter Mine the stockade was afire and rapidly burning, while at a distance of three hundred yards, sheltered by earthen breastworks which they had thrown up during the closing hours of the night, lay the long line of Vigilantes, with weapons ready to defeat any attempt to extinguish the fire.

"It strikes me we are in the very nick o' time!" observed Captain Marshall, grimly.

"Boys, look to your weapons! We'll charge that gang down there, and every shot must count!"

"Lady, you must remain behind. Seek a secluded spot along the trail, and there await the issue of the fight."

Mrs. Coleridge mutely inclined her head, and rode aside.

"Forward, now!" uttered the captain, in a low, stern voice. "Not a sound above a whisper till I give the word, then yell like so many devils—for noise *does* help when you surprise odds!"

Grimly, the troop swept down the trail and through the deserted camp, riding in a compact body until less than a hundred and fifty yards lay between them and the Vigilantes. Then—

"Ready! fire!"

The command broke from Captain Marshall's lips in clarion tones. His men spread right and left, forming a long, open line, yelling, screaming; firing round after round, and charging to the brink of the long and shallow trench.

At the same moment, through a gap in the stockade poured the Regulators, led by Dauntless Dell in person, and, caught between two fires, and believing themselves beset by overwhelming odds, the Vigilantes broke and fled, led by Bartol.

Within five minutes, the short, sharp contest was over, and the power of the Vigilantes was broken.

"Well, Sport, we got here about right!" cried Darrit, as, accompanied by Captain Marshall, he approached Dauntless Dell. "Hey!"

"Just right, Darrit, and if it's your doings I thank you for it," the Sport returned, warmly grasping the detective's outstretched hands.

"Don't thank me! Thank your secret pard! An'—hyar she comes!"

True enough! A black horse, urged by the hand of love, came flying through the camp, to stop within three paces of the little group, while his beautiful rider sprang lightly from the saddle.

"Randolph!"

"A single startled glance, and the Sport's face turned deadly pale."

"My God! You, Nellie?" he exclaimed, and then with a bound he caught the woman to his breast.

A few paragraphs, now, and our story is done.

Hermit Hart, or old Missouri, regained his senses as predicted; and with Randolph Coleridge had little trouble in

securing legal possession of their joint property, the golden Horn and High Horse Mines, while Major Myst publicly confessed that the Lone Hunter belonged to the Sport.

So ended all dispute on that score, and the miners of the camp soon realized that they were the gainers by the all-around transfer.

Of the five original plotters, Slayback and Si Haydoc were hanged after a fair trial; Bartol was killed by Gray Wolf in revenge for the murder of Indian Pete, while Crocker was never again seen in the camp of Big Ledge, and his fate remains a mystery, although it is probable that he returned to the camp and perished in the fire at Riata's Ranch.

Letta and Tom Sawyer eventually joined hearts and hands, and a deed to the High Horse Mine was one among the numerous wedding-presents received by the happy pair.

The day after the big fight Jenkins discovered his mare, Jezebel, grazing around the outskirts of the camp, and his joy at the return of the faithful animal knew no bounds.

There is one event which, in closing, we regret to have to record—the death of Nellie Coleridge.

Excitement, peril and exposure had sapped her strength, and within three months from her reunion with her husband, her father and her sister, she had calmly and peacefully passed from this life to the next.

So perished a very brave and an all-true woman.

Disappointed and embittered, Randolph Coleridge remained in Big Ledge a few months, then settled up his affairs and prepared to leave, to go—he knew not where.

"My enemies killed poor Nellie just as surely as if they had driven a knife through her faithful heart," he declared, in answer to the expostulations of his friends. "Many of them yet live, and she must not go unavenged."

"As Dauntless Dell they hounded me and killed her, making life dark and bitter to me; and as Dauntless Dell I shall follow them to the end."

And he kept his word!

THE END

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